
How to Help a Grieving Child

by Judy Blore

Last summer Jason and his family went out for a day of fun. It was his parents' Sunday School class picnic, and a sizable group of young married couples and their children met at the home of a class member with a great back yard and a swimming pool. It was a fun-filled party. No one expected Jason to die that day—but he drowned in the pool. He was five years old.

The next couple of hours were filled with chaos, hope, and anguish. Many witnessed the scene—the anxiety, the fear, the failure of CPR to resuscitate, the ambulance, the body. The class member who started CPR saw her own three-year-old child watching in horror a few feet away. Jason's own brothers, eight-year-old twins and a fourteen-year-old, watched as his pink body turned purplish blue and then gray. In the end, Jason could not be revived. He died in the presence of so many witnesses.

What do you feel as you read this? Trouble, sorrow, pain? For the children who witnessed this scene, it was and is worse by several orders of magnitude.

We can ask all sorts of questions about why someone wasn't watching more carefully, about what precautions were taken, about how this could happen in a pool surrounded by loving family and friends. But it happened, and it could happen to any of us any time. Little life-changing accidents hap-

pen every day to somebody. It is a miracle of grace that any of us live through a day. Certainly the parents, siblings, and friends present that afternoon have asked themselves those questions, but self-recrimination is an unproductive activity: it keeps our focus on self so that we cannot focus on Christ. And to the family, those questions sound like accusations. Rather than wasting energy on futile questions, our efforts are more productively focused on being helpful to a despairing, bereaved friend. In this article I will concentrate on ways that you and I can help a child through grief and loss.

I make several assumptions as I do this. First, I assume that you have thought about why we suffer in this world that God has made. Perhaps you read Ed Welch's article on suffering in this journal a few years back.¹ I also assume that you care about children and have a desire to be a blessing in their lives. I assume that you know Christ and want to bring Him into your human relationships in a helpful way. And finally, I assume that you are willing to learn in Christ's classroom. I have always found His teaching opportunities with me to be a little beyond my known abilities and knowledge.

Step 1: Know Kids

Stacey was six years old when her little sister died before her eyes in a parking lot

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¹"Exalting Pain? Ignoring Pain? What Do We Do with Suffering?" by Edward T. Welch, *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume XII, Number 3, Spring 1994, pp. 4-19.

accident. Her parents grieved—of course. In a small way and for a short while, Stacey lost them too as they did so, at a time when she needed to rely on them for security and continuity. In the next four years, Stacey's maternal grandmother and her mother's sister both died after long battles with cancer. Thus, ones she loved from three generations died in a brief period, during a time in her development when she was learning much about life and the world. These losses also reflect the large amount of time her mother spent caring for her sick relatives. In the midst of it all, Stacey continued to

How can God's people help these children survive, and even thrive?

grow and thrive, except for nightmares. Having learned in a short period of time that death can come at any age, her greatest fear was that one of her parents would die. She relied on her parents for everything—who would take care of her if they were gone?

What is it like for a child to experience the death of someone close? How is it different when you are eight or twelve or sixteen? Jason's fourteen-year-old brother is trying to take care of the rest of his family while his eight-year-old twin brothers are acting quite differently. One is contemplative and the other is physically expressing his distress. The little three-year-old whose mother tried so hard to give life back to Jason has regressed in skills recently learned. She becomes very distressed by any separation from her parents. How can God's people help these children survive, and even thrive?

Losing a sibling or a parent is a huge event for a child. It is confusing, painful, and difficult enough for an adult who has had some experience with life and its problems. An adult may have learned that pain is temporary, that the Lord is faithful and will not leave or forsake you, that the light will dawn, etc. But a child may not yet know any of these things. A child may not have the ability to step back and look at present events from an eternal perspective. A child may lack the resources to handle such pain and confusion. A child may need help to know that the world is not falling apart, or at least that it is not a permanent condition!

Children will generally exhibit one of three behavioral responses to changes in their lives: they will act out, withdraw, or become the responsible manager of the family. Many, including myself, think that the third option is the most dangerous. The child who is acting

out will get attention, if only a reprimand. The child who is withdrawn will also probably get attention from someone who cares about him. But the third child will more likely be commended for taking on adult responsibilities or excelling in school. People will assume that he is doing fine, though he may or may not be ready for these tasks. Sometime later in life, this house of cards may well collapse of its own weight, for the child has been maintaining the appearance of maturity while the substance of confidence and self-awareness is absent. Such a child needs someone to come alongside and give him his childhood back so that he can grow to maturity by being strengthened from the inside out.

Things Kids Have Said To Me

• "I used to have a little brother to take care of" (spoken by Jason's eight-year-old brother while watching a friend care for her little sister).

• "I tried to make it so my parents wouldn't miss him so much. I did his chores. I came home early to sort the mail so Mom wouldn't see so many college letters for him."

• "Aren't I enough?" (or) "She loved him more than me. She wouldn't grieve this much if I died."

• "When am I coming to heaven too?" A seven-year-old girl posed this question to God just two months after Jason's drowning. Hidden underneath this was a concern about the possibility of her own death.

• "It is hard to decide to love someone [in terms of dating and marriage] because they might disappear too. It is hard to decide to have children because...look at what my parents went through!"

• "My brother and I were supposed to live our lives in parallel—school, marriage, kids, growing old together. He was supposed to be uncle to my children. His kids would be my kids' cousins. I will always miss him."

• "I have no one to share the Christmas morning fun with. Now I am an only child."

• "I was scared because I was not sure my parents would survive." This was spoken by the young adult son of someone you and I would describe as the Rock of Gibraltar.

• "What are they doing in heaven?" An elementary school teacher friend taught me that the life of a young child is about "doing." The idea of heaven as "rest" is not an appealing idea to them. "What will we do in heaven?" Let your mind run for awhile on this one. It is fun to think about it: "many rooms"; "no eye has seen, no ear has heard the wonders...."

These children are worrying about who and what they have lost and how to live without that person; about their own future or their own death; about how

their parents are doing and about their relationship with them. And, in a way much more real and immediate than for most children, their thoughts are turned toward God's plans for His people and His preparations of heaven. Figure 1 describes some typical reactions by age. It is not intended to be normative but informational.

Step Two: Know Grief

Grief is an agony for anyone, any age, any maturity, any faith. Grief takes time. It is a process of letting go of something familiar and taking hold of something in the future. There is a pattern which is generally experienced by all who grieve. For a child, progress through the process is influenced by many factors. Some of

Time Lines and Children's Grief

Infancy to 2 Years of Age

- No concept of death.
- Reacts to emotion in others.
- Will react to the separation from the one who cares for them.

Reactions:

- Crankiness.
- Lots of tears, vomiting, toilet habits regress.
- Child will cling.
- Keep routine intact—child cannot tell time but knows that something is terribly wrong.
- Child is capable of reacting to your stress—have someone else care for them in the short term, if possible.

3 Years to 5 Years of Age

- Age of discovery, a child uses all five senses.
- No abstract thinking—they hear you but cannot interpret the information.
- No concept of death for self—they see death in degrees (children's play).
- Kids want to fix things up for others.
- Believe death is reversible as seen from T.V., movies, etc. They engage in magical thinking.
- They think they have the power to kill.
- No concept of cemeteries.
- No concept of shock—may show little concern.
- They may become emotionally stricken later.
- State the fact of death—no catchy sayings—they need repetition.

6 Years to 10 Years of Age

- They know they can die—they fear death.
- Their talk can be very fearful.
- They need a great deal of reassurance.

10 Years to 13 Years of Age

- Death is very personal—they have a realistic view of death.
- There is curiosity regarding the biological aspects of death.
- There is separation anxiety—children need affection but may be embarrassed by it.

- Boys in grief may lose some manual skills—their grades may fall.
- Children need to vent their feelings, to attend the funeral and leave. They will look for permission.
- There may be emotional separation from the ones they love, a defense and self-preservation mechanism.

Teenage Years

- More adult thought processes evident.
- You should encourage communication.
- Physical touch very important, but ask permission.
- You may need to engage in loving confrontation.

Points to Keep in Mind when Dealing with Children in Grief

- Children cannot sustain emotional pain for long periods of time.
- Do not reject their emotions.
- Do not tell them how to feel or how not to feel.
- Allow the child to comfort you.
- Be patient—they may need to ask the same questions over and over.
- Death is not contagious—be sure to differentiate.
- Maintain order and stability in the child's life.
- Remember that children tend to idolize the dead. Help them gently to regain balance and perspective.

Children's Reaction to Death

- Protect
- Pain, despair, disorganization.
- Hope/reconciliation—depends on age, personality and relationship to the deceased.
- Stable eating/sleeping patterns fall apart and then return to "normal."
- Children often move in and out of grief stages.
- Children need to know they will enjoy life again.
- Children need to know their lives will not always be disorganized and their thinking clouded.
- Let them know they do not have to be ashamed of their grief.
- Grief revisited—holidays can be heavy days.

Attribution: Sister Teresa McIntier and Deirdre Felton

these influences follow.

What was lost? Playmate, opponent, rival, partner, friend, roommate, co-worker (example: at household chores), the social chairman who planned activities and introduced him to new friends. If a parent died, consider the many facets of that relationship: nurturer, teacher, provider, coach, etc. Every facet of these relationships will be something to mourn.

What has to be reinvented? Jason's mother said that one of the things they now must do together is "reinvent" their family. Without Jason's presence, all the relationships change. In her book, *What Is a Family?*, Edith Schaeffer used the image of a giant mobile to describe the dynamics of a family. All the parts are balanced in equilibrium and yet move gently with every puff of wind. With death, one piece of the mobile is instantly cut off. The whole mobile is drastically upset and out of balance. Grieving is the effort to come to a new equilibrium.

What information does this child have about sorrow and survival? Does he know that others have suffered and survived and grown strong through it? Does he know that trouble is not the same as "judgment"?

What else is going on in his or her life right now? Is he already emotionally on edge because of other stres-

sors in his life? Is she doing well in school? Does he have a core of good friends? These issues are particularly important with teenagers, whose internal lives are often quite chaotic under normal circumstances. Imagine adding the emotional chaos of grief to this preexisting chaos.

How are his parents doing? If the child lost someone close, it is likely that his parents lost someone too. Was it their child? A spouse? How disabled, distracted, or encumbered are they?

What other role models and support people does the child have in his life to show him how to grieve?

As we see in Figure 2, loss affects the entire person. The child will express his distress in ways that are

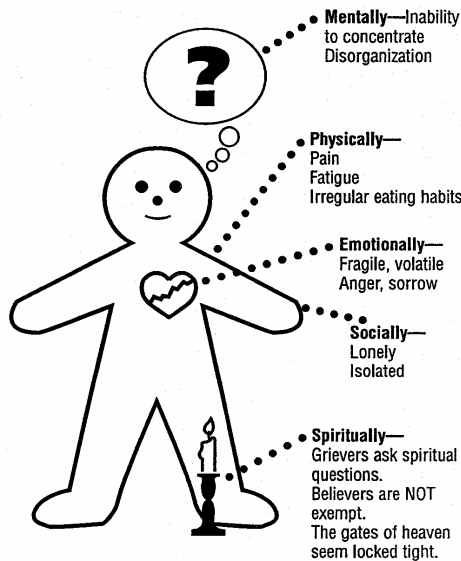
A child will not grieve for an extended period of time.

appropriate to his age and personality. For example, a child's attention span is short—the younger the child, the shorter the span. This means that a child will not grieve for an extended period of time. Instead, he will grieve, play, return to grieving, and play again. Often his play will be about his grief: he may reenact the accident with his toys repeatedly. In so doing he is trying to understand how this tragedy could happen because repetition is how a child learns. (How often did we have to repeat our multiplication tables until we learned them?) Grasping that someone you love has died takes a great deal of repetition before you get your mind around this truth.

A child will also revisit the event of the death and the ensuing grief as she matures. At each stage of emotional and cognitive development, she understands the universe with more maturity. As she does so, she will also seek to understand this important event better. This means that two things are true about helping a grieving child. First, the task is never finished until the child reaches adulthood. Second, everything you say now is a building block for a more mature understanding later. For this reason, it is very important to tell the truth from the beginning. As the child matures in understanding, she will revisit her emotions of grief too. This is not delayed or unfinished grief; it is normal.

An example from my own life: I understood from an early age that my parents had had a child who died before I was born. I knew this and was aware that it affected the home in which I was raised. But when I had my own first child and experienced the love of a parent for a child, I understood on a whole different level the

Grief Affects the Whole Person



love my parents had lost.

In Amy's case, her sister died as a college sophomore in an auto accident on campus. Amy was still in high school. Her grades slipped down a whole level for most of the next two years, but her parents were wise enough to know that she was doing the best she could in her grief. Amy graduated and is now a freshman in college. She chose to go to the same college her sister attended, knowing it would be emotionally hard, yet knowing this was where God wanted her. The third anniversary of the accident came in October. For Amy, this anniversary came with a force of emotion she had not anticipated, stronger than the second anniversary. Now she was a college student like her sister, on the same campus as her sister. She was understanding her loss on a whole new level and experiencing the grief again.

After beginning classes that day, she realized she needed to retreat a little. Later in the day friends realized they hadn't seen her for a few hours. They found her alone in her room and surrounded her with their love. Later they all went out together. Their love, awareness, and flexibility helped her deeply.

Step 3: Know Christ

What would Jesus do to help a grieving child? What can we see from His life that will instruct us on how we might help children who suffer? Here are some lessons that have helped me to be an effective helper.

- Jesus cares for children. He healed some. He told the disciples to let them come up on His lap. He had time and energy for little ones.

- Jesus always tells the truth. Children know what is going on. They know when something is wrong. Tell the truth: someone has died. We live in a world where difficult things happen to good and bad people alike. Tell children the truth about living when death has touched their lives. When we have Jesus, we have a friend with us. We have help. We have redemption—not only of our souls but of the events in our lives so that they work out for good. We have hope for the future that the Lord has planned for us (Jeremiah 29:11).

- Jesus wept. He felt the sorrow of His fellow man at the edge of the grave. And He was not ashamed to express that sadness with overt emotion.

- Jesus comforts us. "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). He comforts with the promise of His presence and with the assurance that He is making preparation for us. As a faithful adult in the life of a hurting child, you have an opportunity to act out God's promise of presence. And then, as in 2 Corinthians 1, He tells us to comfort others.

In Christ we have someone who knows about living in this fallen world. He is the high priest who has experienced life on this planet. He is Immanuel, God with us. This is one of the central themes of Scripture, from Genesis when He walked with Adam in the Garden to Revelation where He makes His dwelling with men. Nothing can separate us from God's love as demonstrated in Christ, not even death or grieving. What happens is under God's supervision. It is not all random, meaningless chaos. God cares about how we handle our circumstances. He cares, and He gives us help. How we handle ourselves in difficulties is significant in the great heavenly battle which continues to go on,

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even though the decisive battle has been won by Christ on the cross. In this battle God is a Rock. He doesn't change. He establishes our feet in secure places. He promises to keep us safe from the evil one. Christ died and rose again, so we have a hope that others do not have—hope in the resurrection. Therefore, we can encourage each other with these things. Helpful Scriptures include Hebrews 4:14, Matt. 1:23, Gen. 2:19, 3:8 and Rev. 21:3, Romans 8:38, Job 1:8-12, Col. 1:24, Psalm 40:2, Heb. 13:8, and 1 Thes. 4:13-18.

Scripture acknowledges that we sometimes feel very sad. Grief is painful, chaotic, and normal. We see in Scripture plenty of evidence of grief: Psalm 6 and 31 describe "anguish in my bones." Jesus wept, and godly men mourned the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:2). Consider the fact that the men who mourned for Stephen were Jesus' contemporaries. Some of them certainly witnessed his death and resurrection, yet they still mourned for Stephen. Believers *can* mourn.

It is also recorded that men and women removed themselves from those who suffer (Psalm 31:11). We still do this today, but Scripture does not commend it. On the contrary, Jesus tells us to comfort, support, and encourage the brokenhearted. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40).

Entering into Relationship

Helping someone grieve requires an application of the teaching principle revealed in Deuteronomy 6. Here God says that parents ought to teach their children while walking along the way, when you get up or lie down, while eating; in short, during the everyday

activities of life. Certainly this has been God's method with His people from the Garden right up through Jesus' relationship with His disciples. This is especially true with someone who is grieving because grieving cannot be completed in a lesson, a lecture, or an appointment. Such structured commitments can be useful parts within a whole helping relationship, but grieving takes place over a long period of time, and helping must also be a process over time. Grief does not usually happen on a schedule.

A bereavement lecturer whom I respect said, "Healing is always in relationship." She made this observation after years of working with grieving children of all ages. She makes no profession of faith, but what she has observed is what our Lord has always offered. He offers Himself to us and promises to never leave or forsake us. He is near. You may have an opportunity to embody this presence in a hurting child's life.

After Jason's death I was part of a team that had the privilege of holding a workshop for the children at his church. The children participating were strangers to us in the beginning. In one activity we sat in a close circle and read a story together. The children were getting restless until we came to the part about the death of a kitten. They became silent and still, listening intently. They guessed that the next thing that would happen was that a person would die too, and this was correct. Their attention was then focused on how the little girl would respond to her grandfather's death. The testimonies of the grandfather who died and of the other characters were clear and faithful to Christ. But reading this or any other book is not "the solution" to a child's grief. Reading the book is just a tool, a focus for a relationship in which you can talk about hurting, hoping, healing, and moving forward. The children trusted us and shared their fears and hopes.

In your relationship with a grieving child, you can be a role model, one who shares the experience of living in a fallen world, a reliable friend. In short, you can make the presence of God come alive. You are, after all, His ambassador. When distressed, it is hard to read and study the Scriptures, but a child can read His word written in your actions.

One thing you can do is demonstrate how to be sad and to hope and trust at the same time. A mother whose son was murdered at work on his first job after college said, "I have learned that peace and pain can co-exist." Model this for the child in your care. Tell him that you know you will come to a point of equilibrium eventually because God is at work. Model your faith that the Lord is reliable and worthy of your trust.

Be the friend who listens. James' principle of listening more than talking is important in this relationship

(James 1:19). Be willing to bear their burden of sadness or confusion. If you are blown away by what they say, they will conclude that what they think really is as big and powerful a threat as it seems. So listen even when it hurts. Never, ever say, "Don't say that!" Listen to their concerns. Then possibly you can offer some insight that will strengthen them, or perhaps you can explain some facts about their concern that will make it less threatening.

A friend also shares the experience of living in a fallen world. Share tears. Tell them you are sad too. Share stories and memories of the one who died. One great fear is that the person will cease to exist if no one remembers them. One of a child's biggest needs is to seal the person in her memories so she doesn't forget. This is accomplished by telling and retelling stories about him.

Answer questions. A child may ask many questions; and as I have already indicated, they may need repetition of both the question and the answer. A child may ask questions that make you uncomfortable, but being a helper is not about your comfort. Stay with them wherever their curiosity takes them. They may ask bizarre questions. At a certain age they will need to know details about death and dead bodies. These are the easy issues. They may also ask questions that have no answers. Acknowledge when there are no answers or when you don't know. For me, it is precisely these questions that provide the cutting edge of my spiritual growth. As I ponder them, I learn more about the personal presence of Christ. I learn more about His truth as applied in the question or about how He gives peace in the mysteries.

In a world that can change suddenly and drastically, God remains the same yesterday, today, and always. A touch of normalcy in their lives can reinforce this for children, perhaps something as simple as getting back to their piano lessons or gymnastics practice. Be the one who faithfully attends their soccer games. Mom or Dad may be hurting so much that this is very hard for them. Take them out regularly each and every week for six months for ice cream or whatever. The regularity and predictability of the commitment is what is valuable.

Let me say a word about the generic offer, "I'll be there for you." If you offer to "be there" for fragile, hurting persons, then you have to fulfill a request if they make one. If you won't be able to be available on a moment's notice, do not offer to "call me anytime"!! You cannot disappoint and reject a fragile person without becoming part of the pain instead of part of the solution. Instead, make a more specific offer or say nothing at all.

As you structure your times together, remember

that grief generates big emotions. These big emotions need to be spent with big physical activity. Allow for that. Plan times to go out and do something, be it baseball, bowling, running, or punching. Use your imagination! Think of an activity that is appropriate for the specific child and for you.

Last but not least, *talk about the hope of the resurrection*. We believe Christ died and rose again, so we have a hope that others do not have. Encourage each other with these things (1 Thes. 4:13-18). Share how this hope helps you in your day-to-day experience.

God is a tailor. Jesus did not make mud of spit and dirt for every blind person He met. He did not yell at every Pharisee—He had a profound conversation with Nicodemus. He tailored His interaction to each individual. You also must tailor your help to each child or young person. I cannot give you a formula of what to say and do. You bring your unique set of gifts and wisdom from God to this unique person.

Step 4: Pray and Move Out

Pray for this child. You know that this loss will have a deep effect on his life and who he becomes. Pray that it is a good effect. Pray for good fruit in his life from the loss, his grief, and your involvement in his life.

Remember to follow these guidelines:

- Be willing to hear their burden of sadness or confusion.

- Tell them why you hope. Tell what you have seen and heard of Jesus. In 2 Thessalonians 4:13-18, we see that our hope of the resurrection influences our grief. Tell what you know about heaven.

- Be patient and persistent. It takes time to reach equilibrium again. It takes a lifetime to gain maturity.

- Be prayerful and flexible. Tailor your helps to you and your young friend.

Here are a few specific Scriptures you might find useful:

- In the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:2) we have hatred, murder, mob violence, personal witness of the violence, and believers grieving.

- In the Psalms we have raw emotion in difficult circumstances coupled with the declaration of faith and trust. I especially like to use Psalms 6, 27, and 31:1-16.

- In Psalm 27:14 and Psalm 40, we find the struggling, hurting believer's chief task revealed. It is to wait. Wait until the promises become reality. Wait for the Lord.

- Job is the textbook on suffering. Some meaningful lessons for a young person may be found here. When Job prayed, he asked tough questions repeatedly. He asked them directly of his God. And God did not banish or punish him for his boldness. If we bring to God

our toughest questions, He can work in our hearts to begin to accept His answers.

- Job on unanswered questions: eventually God did speak to Job, but not with direct answers to his questions. But Job's conclusion was that now he knows God much more intimately (Job 42:3-5).

- Joseph, Jeremiah, and John. Joseph was the victim of several conspiracies, yet God intended it for good (Gen. 45:5ff)—good not only for Joseph but for all people. Joseph was not the center of the events of his life,

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and neither are we. God is. It is a Christocentric universe in which we live. The Lord worked out in Joseph's life the truth of Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...." In John 9:2-3 we learn that it is nothing in us that determines God's plan for us but what brings Him glory. In John 14 we see through a tiny little window into heaven. Jesus tells us about that future plan, just enough to catch the imagination of a child.

What's in all this for you? Questions and surprising insight. Why doesn't God tell us more about heaven? The children in the workshop concluded, "It's a surprise!" We then talked about the surprise party He is preparing for all who love Him. Jason got his invitation earlier than the rest of us. But we are invited as long as we have Jesus in our hearts. He will let us know when it is our turn to come to the party. Meanwhile, we can be patient and productive.

There is also love in it for you. Love from the kids and love from them. Sharing the pain of another's heart is really quite intimate. As our workshop came to a conclusion, our goodbye needed to be equally intimate. I brought some Hershey's Kisses and offered to trade one with each child for a hug. They laughed and easily traded hugs (plural) for Kisses. We have received wonderful notes from these new young friends.

Let me encourage you to prayerfully go forward when the Lord nudges you to be helpful in the life of a hurting child or teen. I, the "bereavement professional," always feel that I am in over my head and out of my depth. But it is in my weakness that His strength is most clearly displayed. The Lord meets needs through us fragile and flawed characters. Go and bless a little one. You will be blessed in doing so.