

Helping Children Cope with Loss: Using the CHILD Technique

Objective

To use the C.H.I.L.D. technique to discuss death with your child to increase the likelihood of healthy coping following a loss.

What to Know

Avoiding the subject of death does not help children appropriately deal with loss. When discussing death with your child, make the explanation as simple, honest, and direct as possible. Questions should be addressed directly, and children need to be reassured that they are safe because they might worry they will also die.

Although it is a difficult conversation to have with children, any discussion about death must include appropriate words (e.g., cancer, died, death). Euphemisms (e.g., passed away, he is sleeping, we lost her) should never be used because these phrases can confuse children, leading to misinterpretations.

Following a death, children can and should be included in the planning of and participation in mourning rituals to memorialize their loved one. Although children should never be forced to attend, their participation should be encouraged, and they can participate in whatever parts of the funeral or memorial service they feel comfortable with. You can prepare them by offering a full explanation of what to expect. For example, you might describe the layout of the room, who will be present (e.g., friends and family members), what the child will see (e.g., the casket, lots of flowers, people crying), and what might happen.

This worksheet will help you discuss death and loss with the children in your life through use of the C.H.I.L.D. technique.

C = Consider:

- the unique situation of the child
- developmental capacity to understand death, grief, and loss
- concerns, thoughts, feelings, and relationship to the deceased

H = Honesty:

- use the “d” words: death, die, dying
- be OK with not having all the answers
- avoid euphemisms
- avoid phrases like “gone away” or “went on a trip”

- do not say that the deceased is sleeping

I = Involve:

- let the child know what is happening
- offer the child factual knowledge about the cause of death
- allow the child to say goodbye to the dying and deceased
- allow the child the choice to participate in the funeral

L = Listen:

- concentrate on discussing any issues or concerns that come up
- let the child talk through what is on his/her mind
- let the child know it is OK to not want to talk about the death
- give the child ways to express grief—art, drawing, play, letter writing, poetry, stories
- be aware of thoughts and fantasies children may have about the deceased
- pay attention to any suggestion of suicide or self-harm
- emphasize death is NOT the result of the child's actions or thoughts
- read a book about death and discuss the child's reactions

D = Do it again

- appropriately share your grief
- children need to see an honest expression of emotions from the adults around them
- remember the developmental capacities and age-related concerns and needs

Adapted from: Davies, B., & Orloff, S. (2010). Bereavement issues and staff support. In G. Hanks, N. I. Cherny, N.A. Christakis, M. Fallon, S. Kassa, & R.K. Portenoy (Eds.). Oxford textbook of palliative medicine (4th ed., p. 1370). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

What to Do

Communication and support from parents and other loved ones are valuable for grieving children. When caregivers can talk about death, express their feelings, and provide support following a loss, children are better able to develop healthy coping strategies. Refer to the CHILD technique and write down how you will address death and loss with your child.

Consider. How old is the child? _____ Relationship to the deceased. _____

Are there unique considerations? If yes, describe.

Honesty. Honestly talk about the loss, as this gives your child permission to talk about it, too. Acknowledge that grief can be difficult, confusing, and involve changing emotions. Write down what you will say.

Remember to ask open-ended questions to better understand your child's understanding of death and physical or emotional reactions. Open-ended questions encourage children to share their own perspectives—giving you some insight into what might be helpful as your child grieves. Write down some open-ended questions you can use during your conversation.

Involve. What are some ways you can involve your child in mourning rituals? Do you have concerns? If so, write them down.

Listen. What are some ways you can support your child during the grieving process?

Do it again. Set an example of healthy grieving by being open about your feelings. Share how you are incorporating the loss into your life in a meaningful way. Acknowledge grief and the associated emotions, model ways of communicating thoughts and feelings, and focus on positive memories. Write down your thoughts.

What are some ways you can create structure and routine for your child, so they experience predictability and stability? Be specific. For example, set a date when your child will return to school and extracurricular activities.

Consider accommodations that might be required as your child adjusts to the loss. For example, modifying expectations for homework that requires sustained attention. Write down some ideas.

Remember, you need to be physically and emotionally healthy as you grieve. Prolonged, intense grieving or unhealthy grief reactions, such as substance abuse, will prevent you from providing support to your grieving child. Mindfulness-based stress reduction is an evidence-based strategy that is effective for both grieving adults and children. For example, you might practice deep breathing exercises, meditate, or exercise. You can even teach mindfulness practices to your child. What are some ways you can take care of yourself?

Mourning takes time, and bereavement is a process that occurs over months and years. Be aware that normal grief reactions may last longer than 6 months. Take advantage of community resources such as grief counseling or bereavement support groups. Community hospice organizations have lists of professionals who provide support for children and families. Where can you get help?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
