

Helping children process grief

A CHURCH RESOURCE GUIDE

Children's grief often manifests in ways we've forgotten to expect. But our smallest members are no less worthy of compassion and patience than their adult counterparts.

Christian therapist Sissy Goff offers the following guidance for assisting grieving kids:

- 1. Don't be caught off guard by sudden swings.** Kids grieve in doses and spurts, feeling what they need to feel where and when an adult might find those same feelings inconvenient, in a grocery store for example. In the next moment, they may go outside and play with a normal level of enjoyment.
- 2. Step into their play.** Younger kids process in the language of play, acting out through toys or role play what has happened to them or their loved one. This is good, and joining them will help them process as well as assist with explaining the unexplainable.
- 3. Let them face their feelings.** Trying to "rescue" a child from their grief won't be helpful in the long run, as the ultimate goal in raising a child who went through a tragedy is the same as raising a child who hasn't. It's important for children to face their emotions in a healthy way, not depending on others, but rather on God. An example of living this out is encouraging them to talk with fellow children who experienced the same or similar situations.
- 4. Prepare for four questions.** Goff says children typically ask four questions in their grieving processes. She encourages parents to preemptively write down answers. The questions are:
 - a. What happened?
 - b. What does this mean for me?
 - c. Who is going to take care of me?
 - d. Is what I'm feeling okay?
- 5. Correct misinformation.** While giving older children and teens the space to talk with their peers, gently correct any misinformation that comes up. With the same goal, consider limiting their access to news outlets or social media.
- 6. Consult a professional when the child needs it.** If a child's grief or anxiety continues to affect their daily life (for example, in the form of consistent flashbacks, aggression, insomnia or stomach pain), it is time to seek a trusted Christian counselor or therapist.
- 7. Remind kids this is not the end.** We serve a redemptive and good God. Share those truths with children and let them know they are not alone.

"We serve a redemptive and good God."

