

Information for Parents on Childhood Traumatic Grief

Introduction

This information guide provides an overview of childhood traumatic grief, its general signs and symptoms, and some suggestions on what parents can do to help their child. Using this guide can be a first step for parents to help them understand their child's experience of intense grief following a death of a loved one that was especially difficult or traumatic. If you are a concerned parent and after reading this guide you think that your child is demonstrating the symptoms of childhood traumatic grief, we recommend that you seek further help.

These guidelines for parents build on the "In-Depth General Information Guide to Childhood Traumatic Grief" and "Brief Information on Childhood Traumatic Grief" and can be found at www.NCTSN.org. Those should be read in conjunction with the information here as they provide essential background for understanding the difference between "uncomplicated bereavement" following a death, childhood traumatic grief, and other reactions to trauma.

Not every child who experiences a death will develop childhood traumatic grief. Many children will experience an appropriate grieving response and in time, with adequate support, adjust to the loss of the loved one. In some cases however, children may have enduring difficulties that interfere with their ability to function and remember the person who died in positive ways.

What Is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

When someone special dies, it can be a very sad and painful experience for the child. When the death occurs as a result of a traumatic event, or when the child experiences the death as traumatic, the child may show signs of both trauma and grief. Childhood traumatic grief is explained more fully in the "In-Depth General Information Guide," but the following basic facts hold true.

- Childhood traumatic grief is an intense grief response that can occur following the death of a loved one
- Childhood traumatic grief is different from and can interfere with the "normal" bereavement process following the death of a loved one.
- Not all children will develop childhood traumatic grief.
- Childhood traumatic grief may appear differently in different children
- Parents, caregivers, and important adults can help children cope with childhood traumatic grief.
- Help is available to parents and children who are experiencing childhood traumatic grief.

Childhood traumatic grief is a condition that some children develop after the death of a close friend or family member. Children with childhood traumatic grief experience the cause of that death as horrifying or terrifying, whether the death was sudden and unexpected (due to homicide, suicide, motor vehicle accident, , natural disaster, war, terrorism, or other causes) or due to “natural” causes (such as cancer or a heart attack). Even if to you, as the adult, the manner of death does not seem to be sudden, shocking, or frightening, the child may perceive the death in this way and can be at risk of developing childhood traumatic grief.

When a child is struggling with childhood traumatic grief, the child’s trauma reactions interfere with his or her ability to go through a normal bereavement process. Because of the interaction of traumatic and grief reactions, any thoughts, even happy ones, of the deceased person can lead to frightening memories of how the person died. Because these thoughts can be so upsetting, the child often may try to avoid all reminders of the loss so as not to stir up upsetting thoughts or feelings. A younger child may be afraid to sleep alone at night because of nightmares about a shooting that she witnessed, while an older child may avoid playing on the school baseball team his father used to coach because it brings up painful thoughts about how his father died in a terrible car accident. In this way, the child can get “stuck” on the traumatic aspects of the death and cannot proceed through the normal bereavement process.

How Is Childhood Traumatic Grief Different from Normal Grief?

In both normal grief (also called “uncomplicated bereavement”) and childhood traumatic grief, children often feel very sad and may have sleep problems, a loss of appetite, and a decreased interest in family and friends. They may also develop increased complaints of physical discomfort (such as headaches or stomachaches), or they may “regress” and return to behaviors they had previously outgrown (such as bed wetting, thumb sucking, or clinging to parents). They may also be irritable, do risky things, be withdrawn, have trouble concentrating, and think about death.

Children experiencing normal grief usually want to talk about the person who died, do things to remember the person, and perhaps find comfort in thinking about the person. Over time they also are able to complete the following “tasks” of normal bereavement:

- Accept the reality and permanence of the death
- Experience and cope with the range of feelings about the person who died , such as sadness, anger, guilt, and appreciation
- Adjust to changes in their lives and identity that result from the death
- Develop new relationships or deepen existing relationships with friends and family
- Invest in new relationships and life-affirming activities
- Maintain a continuing, appropriate attachment to the person who died through such activities as reminiscing, remembering, and memorialization
- Make some meaning of the death that can include coming to an understanding of why the person died
- Continue through the normal developmental stages of childhood and adolescence

For children experiencing childhood traumatic grief, thinking or talking about the person who died often leads to thoughts of the traumatic manner of death. For this reason, these children often try to avoid thinking or talking about the person who died and avoid facing the frightening feelings associated with these reminders. This prevents them from completing the tasks of normal bereavement mentioned above.

What Are Some Common Signs that a Child Is Struggling with Traumatic Grief?

Not all children who experience a traumatic death will develop childhood traumatic grief. Some children will be able to grieve the loss without complications. A small number of grieving children may develop some reactions or symptoms that can become difficult and perhaps interfere with their daily functioning. Signs that a child is having difficulty coping with the death may be noticeable in the first month or two or may not be apparent until one or more years later. Some of these signs include the following.

- **Intrusive memories about the death:** these can be expressed by nightmares, guilt or self blame about how the person died, or recurrent or disturbing thoughts about the terrible way someone died
- **Avoidance and numbing:** this can be expressed by withdrawal, acting as if not upset, or avoiding reminders of the person, the way he or she died, or the things that led to the death
- **Physical or emotional symptoms of increased arousal:** children may show this by their irritability, anger, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, drop in grades, stomachaches, headaches, increased vigilance, and fears about safety for oneself or others

What Additional Challenges Can Increase the Risk of Childhood Traumatic Grief? (Secondary Adversities)

Children who must face additional difficult experiences as a result of the death or are already facing stressful life circumstances are at risk for developing traumatic grief. For example, after a father's death, a child who has to move must contend with both the death of her parent as well as changes in her social network, and a child who is witness to the murder of a family member must deal with legal procedures and unpleasant questions from peers.

What Can Parents Do to Help Children and Teenagers?

Parents can play a very important role in helping children and adolescents affected by childhood traumatic grief. Children may be struggling with finding ways to understand and cope with their reactions to a traumatic loss. Here are some suggestions about ways that parents can help support children:

- Be aware of the common reactions of children described above.
- Remember that not all children will develop childhood traumatic grief, and those that do may demonstrate a range of symptoms depending on their developmental level, personalities, and prior history of traumatic experiences.
- Provide children of all ages with opportunities to talk about their worries and concerns. Children at different ages may need different types of support. Younger children may need more attention, patience, understanding, and a few extra hugs. Older children may need reassurance that it is normal to experience a range of reactions and that there are adults in their lives to help them through difficult times. Some children, especially older children, may not want to talk about their experiences and feelings or may shut adults out.
- Understand that anger or regressive behavior may be a part of a child or adolescent's reaction to a traumatic loss.
- Recognize that children of all ages carefully observe how the adults in their lives are reacting and will often take their cues from the adults around them. Children will find comfort by observing adults manage difficult reactions and model effective ways of coping.

- Be prepared to revisit the loss with children as they become older and acquire new information, develop new questions, and have new experiences.
- Seek support from friends and family to help manage one's own grief.
- Reach out for professional help if you're concerned that a child's reactions are affecting their daily life.

Additional help is available through the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at (310) 235-2633 or (919) 682-1552 or at www.NCTSNet.org.