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HOW TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

It was a sunny August day and Michele Steele watched joyfully as her 5 1/2-year-old son Shae splashed and laughed in the swimming pool.

But as soon as Steele and her son went inside, Shae complained of a pain behind his left eye. Steele thought it might have been a headache, so she asked her 3-year-old daughter Kylie to find an ice pack. When Kylie returned, the tot heard Shae bawling about the pain and her mother talking about taking her brother to the hospital. As her mother carried her brother down the stairs to go to the

BY CARA NISSMAN

g together

car, Kylie heard her brother scream for his daddy and saw his body go still. It was the last time she heard her brother alive.

"Kylie was right there, an observer of all of it," says the Lake Worth mom, holding her daughter in her lap as she remembers the day nearly five years ago when her son died unexpectedly of a congenital cerebral hemorrhage. "She saw when they took Shae away."

The Steeles sought counseling for themselves and learned that Kylie, although only 3, also needed help grieving. Indeed, whether death comes slowly, as when a grandparent has been sick for a long time, or unexpectedly, as in the Steeles' case, parents need to be sensitive to their children's feelings and needs, even while they and other adults are nursing their own grief and pain.

"Although children before the age of 10 may not have a full understanding of death, babies and toddlers and young children do react to loss," says Dr. Carol Berns, co-director of The Children's Bereavement Center in South Miami. "I often say, 'If a child is old enough to love, he is old enough to grieve.'"

When their son Shae died, Brian and Michele Steele sought counseling — and learned that daughter Kylie also needed help grieving. FAMILY PHOTO

How can you explain death?

For a young child, Patrice P. Austin recommends parents start with the basics, saying something such as: "Daddy has died. We're all very sad right now and we're not sure of all the details, but we know Daddy's body isn't working," says Austin, founder and executive director of Hearts and Hope Inc., a bereavement center especially for children in West Palm Beach. "You can say, 'It's very hard for me to talk right now. I know it's scary for you. It's scary for me. When I learn more I will talk about it.'"

Using concrete, clear language appropriate to your child's age is essential, says Berns, because saying, "We lost Grandma last night," might confuse a child, spurring him to think he can find her. Similarly, comparing death to sleep might cause a child to fear bedtime.

Social worker Mark Alper says parents should let their children guide them in how much to explain. "Parents tend to over-talk," says Alper, the director of the North Star Centre, a comprehensive counseling center in Boca Raton. "You don't need to get into a philosophical discourse with your 6-year-old."

When Shae died, the Steeles told Kylie simply, "His body didn't work anymore so the angels took him away to heaven,"

Books for guidance

Before buying books on coping, make sure they fit your beliefs and don't contain anything potentially disturbing, such as comparisons to sleep. Here are some suggestions:

AFTER YOU LOSE SOMEONE YOU LOVE: ADVICE AND INSIGHT FROM THREE KIDS WHO'VE BEEN THERE

By Amy Dennison, Allie Dennison and David Dennison
Free Spirit, January 2005, \$9.95

THE EMPTY ROOM: SURVIVING THE LOSS OF A BROTHER OR SISTER AT ANY AGE

By Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn
Scribner, 2004, \$23

TALKING ABOUT DEATH: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN PARENT AND CHILD

By Earl A. Grollman
Beacon, 1991, \$17

THE GRIEVING TEEN: A GUIDE FOR TEENAGERS AND THEIR FRIENDS

by Helen Fitzgerald
Fireside, 2000, \$12

THE KEEPING QUILT

By Patricia Polacco
Aladdin, 2001, \$6.99

says Steele. "We told her that he wasn't in pain anymore and that his body was just a shell. We said she might not be able to see him or hear him, but she can still feel him, his soul."

Reminding a child that he's safe and that others around him are fine also can help lessen a child's anxiety. To make sure children don't blame themselves for the death, parents should ask about kids' last words and experiences with the person who died. "Children might have irrational beliefs like something happened because they wished it," says Dr. Mitch Spero, a licensed psychologist and director of Child & Family Psychologists in Plantation and Weston.

Watch for little reactions

Children may not know they're grieving.

"They might get cranky or clingy," says Berns. "They might do some regressive behaviors, ask for comfort foods like mac-and-cheese and chocolate pudding. They might be angry and not know why they're

acting or feeling that way. Parents have to invite them to express their feelings in an appropriate way."

It's all right if a child doesn't react much to the death of a grandparent who lived 3,000 miles away and rarely visited. But if there's been a significant loss and the child isn't acknowledging it, he might need some professional help.

"Some kids won't talk about it because they want to protect their parents and keep everything stable," says Berns. "But if a child starts to decline physically or act out repeatedly, experiences extreme sadness, chronic nightmares, loss of concentration or withdraws from friends and changes eating habits, these can be red flags that a child might need to talk with a specialist working with children in grief."

It's OK to show your own grief

Many parents think they have to hide their sorrow from their children. It's important for children to keep up routines, but parents don't have to be robots

Coping in common

HEARTS AND HOPE INC.

West Palm Beach
free counseling and support to grieving children ages 3-17
561-832-1913
www.heartsandhope.org

THE CHILDREN'S BEREAVEMENT CENTER

South Miami
Support group meetings in donated space at Ransom Everglades School
305-668-4902
www.childbereavement.org

DR. MITCH SPERO

Child & Family Psychologists, Plantation and Weston
Will oversee a short-term support group if several Broward County families are interested. No current group.
954-587-7520 or 954-349-2777
<http://yp.bellsouth.com/sites/childandfamilypsychologists>

to be there for their kids.

"It's healthy for children to see their parents and other adults be tearful and then be able to wipe away their tears, pull themselves back together again and not fall apart," Berns says.

Parents should explain to children the rituals that occur after a death and ask them if they want to participate. "It's good for children to see adults gather together and support each other," Berns says. "It lends a sense of community."

Having a last moment with the dead also can make it more tangible for some children, but make sure you give them a good idea what they'll see and don't force them to go where they're not comfortable, Austin says.

Although they brought Kylie to Shae's funeral, the Steeles regret not letting her see him in the coffin. "In retrospect, she would have been fine," says Steele's husband, Brian. "It would have opened up a lot of doors for her."

To Sheri Dennison, the most important thing for her children to know before the funeral for their father, who died of an arrhythmia in 1996, was that most adults would be crying — a lot. "It can be a freaky thing for kids to see," she says.

Let them work through the pain

Dennison, formerly of Boca Raton and now living near New Haven, Conn., also gave her children, Dave, then 4, and twins Amy and Allie, then 8, a sense of control by encouraging them to pick out drawings they had made for their father to put in his casket.

And she learned a valuable lesson: Children grieve differently from adults. "I was a wreck, but the kids were cracking themselves up looking at their old drawings. They were crying one minute and laughing the next. That's how kids are. For them, death isn't a big black cloud that stays over

For the Behan children, Harley had always been a part of the family.

BEHAN FAMILY PHOTO



BY LY

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them for weeks. It comes and goes.”

Parents should help their children understand that this is normal and that they shouldn't feel guilty for finding distractions from grief.

Dennison had her children keep journals so they could work through their pain. The entries they wrote for more than two years, along with their tips for grieving kids, now make up the just-released book *After You Lose Someone You Love: Advice and Insight from Three Kids Who've Been There* (Free Spirit, January 2005, \$9.95). It's a priceless peek into kids' minds.

“It was very therapeutic,” says Dennison's daughter Amy, now 17. “It helped us understand and support each other and see that we were really going through the same things in our heads.”

Similar projects can help keep memories strong years after a loved one has died. Kylie, now 8, and her dad recently built a little wooden casket painted with angels and stars and placed a sweet picture of Shae inside. The project wasn't



maudlin. It was meaningful.

“She once asked me at the mausoleum where Shae's buried, ‘Mom, don't you wish you could just open it and see him one last time?’” says Steele. “I told her I did. Now this is one way we can.”

Don't wait

So what's the best way to help children cope with loss? “Don't wait for death to come before teaching about life,” says Austin. “Teach children that there are transitions in life. The sun goes up, the

sun goes down. You're not teaching the word ‘die,’ you're teaching the word ‘change.’ Flowers, animals, seasons — everything has a life cycle.”

Kylie and her parents are teaching her two younger siblings, Jade, 3, and Trae, 4, about change and resilience by celebrating Shae's life. The Steeles, who have gained strength and hope by working with Austin at Hearts and Hope, have a special Christmas tree for Shae and go to his favorite vacation spot, Sanibel Island, on anniversaries of his death.

“Jade and Trae watch videos of Shae and they know he's their brother,” says Steele. “He's very much a part of our lives.”

Cara Nissman, a freelance youth and family reporter in West Palm Beach, is grieving the loss of a close relative who died unexpectedly last year.

With her dad's help, Kylie Steele made a small casket with a picture of her brother Shae inside as a surprise for her mother's birthday.

FAMILY PHOTO