



Is My Child Holding It In?

Many times parents express concern that their young child is not openly grieving the death of a loved one. They notice their child is not crying, is not withdrawn or even talking about the loss. In fact, their child might appear as if nothing has changed at all.

Parents worry their child is “holding it in” and are fearful the unresolved grief will negatively impact their child later in life. We are always pleased when parents are proactive in seeking intervention for their child at the time of family crisis and we typically recommend 2-4 sessions of individual counseling in order to assess the child’s responses, facilitate the expression of grief and most important, assess his or her developmental level.

Children have to live the loss of a loved one in order to fully understand the concept of death. They have to experience dad not coming home each evening, and not attending their t-ball games, and not waking them up on Sunday mornings for pancakes before they can understand the finality of death. Often, the observable grief of young children is not expressed until after there have been months or even years of those experiences.

Developmentally, children need to have some vocabulary and communication skills to be able to understand that death has occurred and to express their grief in a more overt, straightforward manner. This is especially important if a death was due to a sudden illness or accident because in those situations it appears to the child as if the person has just disappeared. Young children will often ask the same questions repeatedly as they are trying to grasp the information provided.

What can a parent do to help a young child express their grief?

- Put words to what has happened: “Daddy *died* in a car accident and he *won't be coming home*. Daddy is now ____ (where? fill in the blank with your own beliefs).
- Provide words that help them express their grief: You must *miss* Daddy very much. It feels *lonely* without him around. It is *okay to cry* and *feel mad* or *sad* that Daddy isn't here.
- Help your child remember their loved one: “Remember when Daddy built the fort for you in the backyard?” “Look at this picture of you and mom opening her birthday present. “She loved the earrings you picked out for her.”
- Help your child keep their loved one “alive” in the family language forever: “Daddy would have been so proud of how fast you learned to tie your shoes.” “Do you want to wear mom’s pearls to the prom?” “I think your father would have loved this story you wrote. You are creative just like he was.”
- Demonstrate it is ok to cry. Don’t shield your child from your own sadness: “I’m crying because I miss your mom but I’ll be ok and I’m here to take care of you. I’m just really sad right now.”
- Remember grief has no timetable, no calendar. It takes as long as it takes. Don’t hesitate to talk about the person who has died even years after the death. It is another way to honor your child (and your loved one) by recognizing the loss.

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