

HOSPICE FOUNDATION OF AMERICA'S

# HOSPICE AND CAREGIVING BLOG

STORIES AND ARTICLES ABOUT THE END-OF-LIFE EXPERIENCE

MONDAY, APRIL 7, 2008

## Supporting Children's Grief

*Hospice Foundation of America's 2008 Living with Grief Teleconference will focus on the experience of grieving children and adolescents and the ways that hospice professionals, teachers and school administrators, grief counselors, funeral directors, and parents can best support these populations as they cope with loss and grief. We asked one of our regular contributors, Vince Chiles, to discuss his experiences with children and grief.*

Children often live in the midst of the dying. This fact seems counterintuitive when we think of people at the beginning of their lives, but many children will experience the death of a loved one. In fact one of the most magical things a hospice worker witnesses, is the connection between the terminally ill grandparent and the young child or adolescent. A few years ago,



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we had a patient whose five year *Vince Chiles* old grandson tucked his grand dad in every night. This was very touching and a powerful reminder of the mystery of the circle of life.

I have seen this connection time and time again, of the young comforting the old in their time of need. The very old and young balance each other and remind us of how our own vulnerability supports the life process. In the Native American traditions there is a simple prayer 'to all our relations.' It is often said at the beginning and end of ceremonies to commemorate the actions of the group in relation to those who came before and those who are yet to come. Life is a circle that is connected with death and birth, again and again.

The grieving youngsters' feelings are real and profound when they lose their ancient guides. The thought of not attending my Aunt Joan's funeral when she had died thankfully never entered my parents' minds. All eight of my siblings attended her burial recognizing the finality of life, and validating our grief. There are those families who do elect to exclude youngsters from memorials and funerals. Perhaps they think shielding the child from the presence of the dying and deceased protects them in some way, but I have found this to be a contrary perception that can create more problems. The classic story is that of the Buddha, a prince shielded by all suffering in life, due to an infancy prophecy that the prince would become a holy man. When the young prince had a glimmer of suffering he left the security of his palace to discover the secret of life –desire creates suffering. The king lost his beloved child, to the realities of the world. Children are their own beings who need respect and support through

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their own grief, not denial or protection.

If we choose not to shield the child from death, how can help guide them through their grief? We can support the grieving child in many ways. It is important to tell the child what is going on with their loved one, and what to expect. 'Grandma is sick, and she's not going to get better this time. That means she will eventually die, and we have help from hospice here. They can talk to you if you would like.' Offering a child or grandchild the services of a hospice social worker can be a great thing for the child or adolescent to prepare for saying goodbye and adjust to the grieving process. When a child or grandchild says goodbye, the parent or grandparent suffers less. It may be a heart-wrenching encounter to witness, but the potential benefits outweigh the consequences of not bidding farewell. Providing grief support resources after someone has died in the form of educational groups, grief and loss camps, support groups, or one-on-one counseling can all help. It is important through that the child be open to these services and that they are able to opt-out or maintain some control if activity becomes to overwhelming.

Children and adolescents grieve differently than adults do. They may need to draw pictures when they are very young to make sense of what has happened, or have some alone time to figure it all out when they are older. I remember a Native American boy I had worked with on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, who was so angry that his father had died when he needed a positive role model in his life. We walked to the White River and started to throw rocks into the water. I challenged him to throw the rocks as far as could across the river, letting go of his anger,

and allowing the water to wash away his pain and suffering as his angry rocks were swallowed up by the current.

Finding creative ways to help children and adolescents grieve can also help the adults around them process their loss. Children are grounded in their intuition and haven't figured out how to rationalize and explain away life's mysteries. They can draw a picture or express themselves with other creative outlets that inspire us to see their wisdom in spite of their youth. Hospice social workers, bereavement counselors, and volunteers are great resources to families with grieving children and they often provide support to families in need regardless of whether the family received hospice care.

Magic in many instances is an illusion, but the magic in hospice when a child grieves effectively is that they evolve into healthy adults. They learn to see the connections in the circle of life, and recognize the vulnerability we all share. Children who learn to grieve well recognize the interdependence of life, and can appreciate the relationships they have on a deeper level. Helping a child learn how to effectively grieve a loss, is a little magic we all could benefit from.

*Vince Chiles, MSW*

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1 COMMENTS:

 Carol D. O'Dell said...

I was a sandwich generationer caring for my mom (in our home) and raising our three daughters. The last three years were challenging--as a parent, wife, and daughter.

I tried to shield my children as much as I could from the "dark side of caregiving," but I also wanted them to realize they were/are a part of a family, and that love and commitment defines us.

My mom died in my home--and I tried to let my children feel it/participate as much or as little as they chose to--naturally. They witnessed hospice, the funeral services, the details of finishing a person's life, and we all grieved, each in our own way.

I think they felt that initial void as much as I did. We were tender with each other, and it took a while to gather steam and go on with our lives.

Today, we talk about my mom all the time--tell stories, laugh, shed a tear--and I think that we were able to move on in part, due to the fact that we were there--we did experience my mother's passing, each in our own way--and there's almost a sense of completion.

Thank you for this article. Knowing how to delicately handle death and grieving with our children is crucial.

~Carol D. O'Dell  
Author of *Mothering Mother: A Daughter's Humorous and Heartbreaking Memoir*

available on Amazon  
[www.mothering-mother.com](http://www.mothering-mother.com)