

children



Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

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What Bereaved Children Want Adults to Know About Grief

Perhaps wisdom about grief and how to heal comes more from the *innocence* of life experiences than it does from the years of life experiences. Over the years, I have learned that bereaved children have so much to *teach us!* Now if we, as adults, can only learn to listen and allow them to be our teachers.

The purpose of this next series of three articles is to share some important principles that bereaved children have taught this author. We will review five teaching principles in each of the articles in this series. I was inspired to write about this particular topic by a darling eight-year-old boy, named Roger.

I'll never forget the day I met Roger for the first time. It was the first day of spring, and we both seemed glued to the road-race set as we raced our little cars around and around.

After Roger won our fifth race, he broke the silence. "I wish grownups would let me tell them something. It just seems like all the adults talk to me since my mommy died, but they don't let me talk."

This little boy's insight struck me as being very powerful. I encouraged him to help me understand, and we went on to talk about his need to talk instead of being talked to. Yes, children have so much to teach us! Let's listen as we learn from a summary of "Roger's Principles About Children and Grief":

1 *Allow children to be your teacher about their experience of grief.*

"If you assume you know all about my grief, it's like you don't respect me. The love I had for the person who died was very special and not like anybody else's. And I'm different—nobody else is just like me.

"It's all right if you try to understand how I feel, but please don't tell me you 'know just how I feel,' because you don't. All I need is for you to help me find ways to tell you how I feel and for you to *really listen* to me."

2 *Don't assume that every child who's in a certain age group understands death the same way or has the same feelings.*

"Naturally, even kids expect that grown-ups will read and study how different age groups understand something as important as death, but give us a break! Listen to us and learn from US, and give us the freedom to be different, even from other kids our own age, in our feelings and understanding.

"After all, we come from different kinds of homes and have different kinds of teachers in different schools. Some of us have parents who pay attention to us and some of us don't. In some kids' families, there is a long line of tradition about how death and grief should be handled and some of our attitudes have been shaped by those traditions. Some of us are quiet and shy, and some of us talk ALL the time. Some kids learn faster than others, and they can remember better. Some kids are scared about death, others just think it's kind of interesting.

"Some adults decide that kids are 'too young' to be affected by death without bothering to think about how we feel even when we don't understand all the 'thinking stuff.'" Even little babies can have feelings when someone dies.

"Kids usually understand that the grownups in their lives are just trying to protect them from hurt, and we appreciate that love; but that kind of protection doesn't really help us for very long. Besides, we know you're really trying to protect yourselves, too, when you shut us out of what's going on. Then, we just feel even more confused and isolated and lonely. And maybe even more afraid, too."

3 *Healing in grief is a process, not an event.*

"It isn't enough just to tell me that someone I love has died. I need a lot more than that. I really need to have you under-

stand that it will take a long time for me to grieve and sometimes I will get very tired. Maybe that's why I've heard adults call it the 'work of mourning.'

"A lot of adults seem to be telling me to 'hurry up and get over it,' and they want me to be strong; but I really feel so weak. I just seem to know inside that I will have to face this pain before I can really heal.

"I guess in time I'll be able to adjust and accept my life without the person I loved, but I'll never be quite the same as before, and it will help me if you'll patiently accept that. I need your help to go on in my life, to continue to grow up and find out what my own directions in life should be. After all, you grownups don't 'get over' your own grief either, even if you sometimes try to fool yourselves into thinking you do. (We kids are smarter than you think!)"

4 *Don't lie or tell half-truths to kids!*

"When you lie to me, or tell me only part of the truth, it makes me feel unloved and humiliated. When you said, 'Grandpa went away on a journey,' I guess you were trying to protect me, but I was confused. (Nobody gets that sad because someone went on a trip.) Sometimes you don't give us kids credit for being smart enough or strong enough. We can almost always cope with what we know, it's trying to handle what we don't know that's the big problem.

"If you 'fib' to us, we fill in the empty places with our imaginations. We make up stories to fill in the blanks, and we can think up things that are a whole lot worse than the truth would be!

"Besides, hiding things from us makes us feel like we've been bad or that we've done something wrong. It also teaches us that it's okay not to be honest all the time. So, please tell us the truth, and we'll be honest with you, too."

5 *Don't wait for "one big tell-all" to begin to help children understand death.*

"Grownups sometimes think kids should reach some 'magic age' before they can teach us anything about death. Well, there isn't any 'magic

age.'

"Actually, we go through losses all the time, all through our lives. Friends move away, pets die, teachers and classmates change, sometimes parents get divorced. It's not that we don't understand that loss and change will happen, it's just that we'd rather have the adults we love and trust walk through these experiences with us than feel like we have to go through it all alone.

"You know, we kids watch TV and learn a lot of things, too. We know that the adults in our world have created weapons that can wipe out the entire world with the flip of a switch. We also know that you have invented all kinds of amazing things that can make people live longer--artificial hearts, cryonic suspension, respirators--stuff like that.

"So, it's even harder for us to understand you. You seem to want to be able to kill people instantly, or make them live forever! You adults are pretty hard to figure out sometimes. But what's really confusing is why so many of you are afraid to talk to us about death. You're getting better than you used to be about talking to us about sex, but you still have a long way to go when it comes to telling us about death and grief.

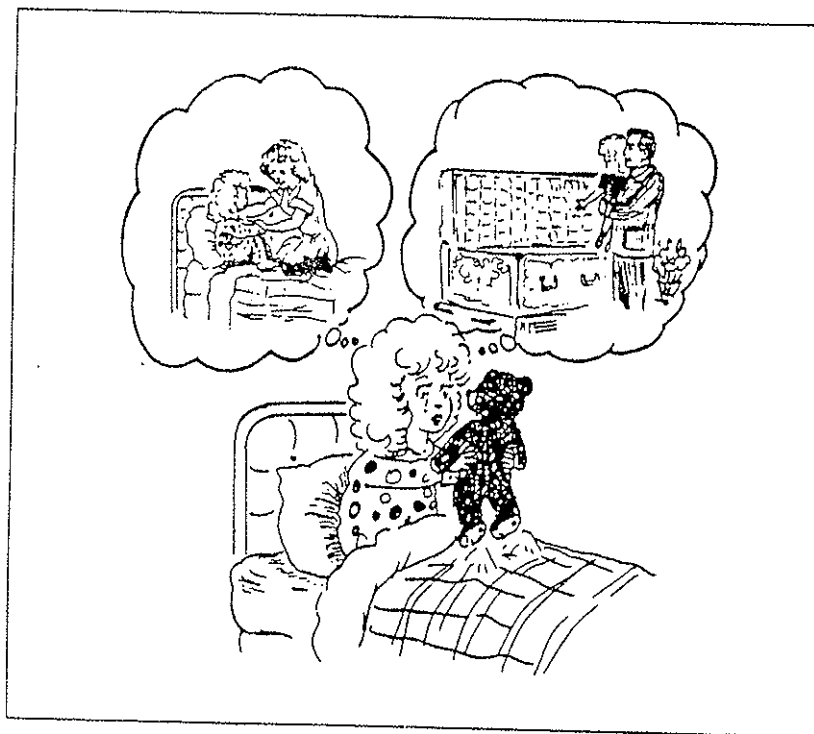
"When I came across a dead bird in the back yard, or when my pet died, I didn't want to run right out and get a new one. I needed some time to learn how to mourn. You can help me understand about losses, grief and mourning when you share feelings with me about a neighbor child who has cancer, or when Grandpa died, or when I hear about a school-yard shooting on TV, or when the space shuttle exploded. These are all opportunities you have to learn with me and to teach me from your experiences so we can both learn more about death and grief, and sometimes we can even cry together.

"Death is a part of life and I'm curious about it. Please teach me all through my growing-up years as occasions come up, and don't wait for one 'big tell-all.'"

A Final Word from A.D.W.

We will continue to allow children to "teach us" as this series continues with the next two issues. Then we will check in on our friend Sarah who is continuing her journey into grief.

P.S. Sarah thanks those of you who have inquired about her by mail. She will have much to share with you in future issues. See you next time.



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What Bereaved Children Want Adults to Know About Grief

During this, another holiday season, we are especially challenged with preparing children and ourselves to face grief realistically, honestly and with love. The principles outlined in our present series of letting "children teach us" are valid and important at any time; but they may become especially useful as we face the conflict between the gaiety and nostalgia of the holidays and the sorrow of loss.

"In a small town, lived a young, blind boy who carried a lighted torch wherever he went, both day and night. Many townspeople wondered why he carried the torch, since it couldn't possibly serve any useful purpose for him.

"One day, someone finally asked him, 'Why do you carry that torch?' Without hesitation, he replied, 'Oh, I don't carry this light for myself, but for others. The torch makes it possible for others to see me. Then they can help me avoid stumbling into ditches or getting off to the side of the path.'"

Yes, sometimes adults need to help keep children (particularly bereaved children) from "stumbling into ditches or getting off to the side of the path." But, we may fail to notice a "lighted torch" unless we are looking and listening. The torch only seems to be illuminated when we actually seek to understand the bereaved child's experience.

This is the second in a series of three articles that outline important principles that bereaved children have taught this author. Let's listen in as we review numbers six through ten of "Roger's Principles About Children and Grief."

6 *Encourage us to ask questions about death.*

"When somebody we love dies, grownups need to be open, honest and loving. Please be patient with us when

we ask you questions that may not seem important to you. I may even ask a question like Big Bird did on Sesame Street when Mr. Hooper died: 'Who's going to make me birdseed milkshakes and tell me stories?'

"Remember, our minds don't work the same as yours. Our questions may seem strange; but they are honest, and we need to know the answers. When you do answer us, please try to use words we can understand. It's hard for us to us to make pictures in our minds of things we've never seen.

"Don't worry if you don't have all the answers, either. It's more important for you to treat our questions with the same respect and courtesy that you would another adult's, than it is for you know all the right answers.

"We might repeat some of our questions as time goes on, but that's natural for us. We can't understand all of it the first time, so every time we ask again and again, and you answer over and over, we understand more and more."

7 *Don't assume that kids always grieve in some kind of orderly and predictable way.*

"We listen to you adults talking about the 'stages of grief,' but the way we feel and talk about our grief can change from day to day. Sometimes, when you don't understand us, you say 'they are in such-and-such a stage.' But, it's just not that simple! When you hang onto some strict idea about these 'stages' you talk about, you don't really help us at all. In fact, it seems like you want to get us to some other 'stage' or something. Why can't you just let us be where we are?"

"I guess we need to remind you that no two of us are alike; each of us is different and special, even if we come from the same family. If you try to push us into the 'stage' you think we should be

in, we probably won't like you very much.

"Maybe you could just kinda follow our lead and let us teach you where we are in our grief. Yeah, that would be kind of nice, if you could just accept us where we are."

8 *Let us know that you really want to understand us.*

"Please let us know that you really care about our feelings. Some adults say they feel sorry for us, but that's not what we need.

"We want you to take us seriously enough to let us teach you about our grief. We want you to feel that our thoughts and feelings are important enough for you to want to learn from us. In other words, we want your respect. We need to be able to share our grief with you without fear of being criticized or abandoned.

"We are sensitive about who really cares and who doesn't. A lot of what we feel from you comes from things other than just words. Your tone of voice and eye contact are really important and so is knowing that you will be patient with us. After all, it takes awhile for us to trust you enough to talk about our feelings with you."

9 *Don't misunderstand what may seem to be a lack of feelings when someone we love dies.*

"Sometimes we hurt so much that we don't want to believe someone has died. It's like if we pretend it hasn't happened, then maybe it

didn't. This doesn't mean we didn't love the person, it just means we can't absorb all that pain at once.

"There is a difference between what we know in our heads and in what we know in our hearts. The shock of learning about the death of someone we loved is really hard for us. Maybe 'Nature' just takes care of us by letting us shut part of it out for awhile.

"Sometimes we go out and play right after we are told about the death. Some adults might think we are not grieving because we are trying to have fun. Usually, we are just trying to play so it doesn't hurt so much.

"Sometimes adults think we should cry and show our grief all the time. Sometimes, they try to force us to show feeling when we are trying not to feel. Please don't make us hurt so much. We need your understanding, not your pressure."

10 *Allow us to participate in the funeral.*

"Please invite us to be a part of the funeral. We may be young, and we may not understand everything; but we need to be included. This is an important family time, and we will always remember that we were included as an important part of the family.

"You can help us by letting us know ahead of time not only what we will see at the funeral, but why we even have funerals. Don't just tell us we are going to the funeral, help us understand why we are going. Talk

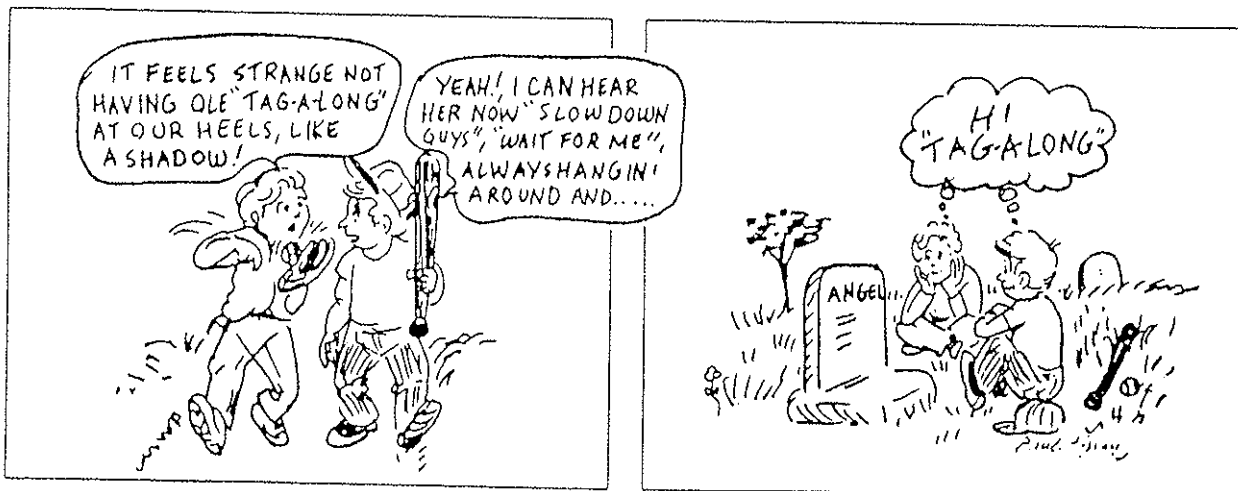
to us about what the room will look like, who will be coming, and how long we will be there. Let us know that we will see people who have a lot of different feelings: tears, laughter... whatever. Allow us to feel our own feelings, too.

"Help us understand that the funeral is a time to honor and remember the life of the person who has died. Explain that it's a time for friends and families to be helpful to each other. Let us know that you appreciate us and the ways we try to help you and others.

"There is so much going on that is confusing and hard for us to understand. We need to know that before, during and after the funeral, there will be grownups around us that we can trust. Sometimes we have questions that only you can help us with; but if you are too upset to help us, it will be okay if you find another loving adult who can be with us for awhile.

"Even though we may not understand everything about the funeral, we will always remember that you thought enough of us to include us."

NOTE FROM A.D.W. My hope is that the second in this series of three articles will assist caring adults in their efforts to help bereaved children. If you look for the lighted torch, you will probably see it. Only then will you find yourself reaching out to lend a helping hand! See you next month.



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What Bereaved Children Want Adults to Know About Grief PART III

Ralph Waldo Emerson once commented, "The secret to education is respecting the pupil." It is my hope that our present series of articles has helped us respect what bereaved children have to "teach us" about death and grief. I was once again reminded of the wisdom of children when I observed the following during the recent holidays:

Seven-year-old Lindsey received a beautiful new doll from her grandfather. "It's such a nice doll," Lindsey cried out, hugging her new doll. "Oh, thank you, Grandpa!"

Lindsey played with her new doll most of Christmas day. However, by the time evening arrived, she put down her new doll and went to find her old doll. Lindsey rocked the old doll in her arms. The doll's nose was broken, one eye was gone, and an arm was missing.

"Well, well," smiled Grandpa. "It looks as if you like that dolly the best."

"I like the pretty new doll you gave me, Grandpa," said little Lindsey. "But I love this old doll the most, because if I didn't love her, no one else would."

Watching and learning from Lindsey reminded me that if we, as adults, don't pay attention to bereaved children's needs, no one else will!

Let's listen as we review numbers eleven through fifteen of "Roger's Principles About Children and Grief."

11 Don't forget about the concept of "magical thinking."

"Sometimes we kids believe that our thoughts can cause things to happen. Most of us have had times when we wished people around us would go away and leave us alone. Then, when someone dies, we often think we caused it to happen because of something we did, thought, or said.

"We might blame ourselves for all

sorts of stuff we had nothing to do with. Some of us even feel totally responsible for the death, but we can't say anything to anybody about how we feel. Please keep an eye out for those of us who might even try to punish ourselves because we think we caused someone to die.

"Talk to us at our level about how the person died. Help us understand that being angry or upset with someone doesn't make them die. You probably would be helping us if you were real open about the fact that it was nothing we did that caused the person to die."

12 Remember that feeling relief doesn't mean a lack of love.

"The person in our lives who died may have been sick a long time. They might have been in a lot of pain and seemed to hurt all the time. All of our 'family time' seemed to center around the person who was sick.

"When that person died, part of us might have been real relieved. But just because kids like to have some attention too, please don't think that we didn't love them. We loved them a lot, but we're glad they don't have to be in all that pain anymore.

"Some adults can't seem to let us talk about these feelings of relief. If we can't talk about our feelings, we sometimes feel guilty for having them. Can you try to let us know it's okay to feel this way? We sure hope so."

13 Realize that our bodies react when we experience grief.

"Our bodies really seem to talk to us, sometimes. Especially when sad things happen, like when someone dies. Why do you think we go to see the school nurse so much?

"When our heads and hearts don't feel good, our bodies don't feel good either. We might feel tired, have tummy aches, sore throats and have trouble sleeping. While those things seem to go away over time, we need you to understand about this.

"Please don't just tell us it's all in our heads because of the death. After all, we really do feel sick. We need your support and understanding, not your judgment.

"You will also find that if you don't let us 'talk out' or 'play out' our grief, that our bodies will try to keep telling you what our needs are. We've got to have some way of getting our grief outside of ourselves. If our body problems go on and on, take us to the doctor. Sometimes, we really need some medicine, and even if we don't, it will probably reassure both you and us."

14 Don't feel bad when you can't give us a total understanding about religion and death.

"We don't expect you to be able to instantly teach us about faith

or religion. You can only share what you truly believe. Just keep in mind we have a tough time understanding ideas that don't give us any clear mental pictures. (Or at least any that match yours.)

"Just do the best you can to explain religious beliefs in simple words we can understand. Sometimes we may have to get a lot older before we can understand all your thoughts in this important area, but we sure do like it when you care enough to try to help us.

"Oh, and please, whatever you do, don't tell us God needed another 'good' person in Heaven, so He 'took' the person we loved. If you tell us that, we might start being 'bad' so God won't need us the next time!"

15 Keep in mind that grief is complicated.

"We know that 'grief work' is 'hard work,' so as we do this work, please let us know that these feelings we have are not something to be ashamed of or something to hide. Remind us in a kind way that grief is

a normal expression of love for the person who has died.

"It seems to us that you adults have a choice—to help or not to help us cope with our grief. We hope you will choose to help us during one of our most difficult times in life.

"With your love, compassion and understanding, we can all learn from each other. With your help, we can make the experience of grief a valuable time for our own personal growth and development. Thanks for caring enough to let us 'teach you.'"

A FINAL WORD FROM A.D.W.
Herbert Hoover once stated that "Children are our most valuable natural resource." This series of three articles has hopefully allowed us to make use of the precious resource of bereaved children to "teach us" about being "helping-healing" adults!



Alfred, I'm here to help!
I found all the scriptures that condemn grieving,
and God has impressed it upon me to . . .



... MUMPH!!