



Children

Ten Common Myths About Children and Grief — Part II

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The Center for Loss and Life Transition places a primary focus on education for both professional and lay caregivers. At the Center, opportunities are provided for people to participate in regularly scheduled training sessions taught by Dr. Wolfelt.

Set in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, the Center is an ideal environment for learning and for "caring for the caregiver."

A respected author and educator, Alan brings years of experience with bereaved children to his work with this magazine. Among the books he has written are: *Helping Children Cope With Grief*; *Death and Grief*; *A Guide for Clergy*; and *Interpersonal Skills Training: A Handbook For Funeral Home Staffs*.



While many people have a desire to be helpful to bereaved children, and that desire is admirable, there is a responsibility to distinguish facts from fiction. Many well-intentioned, yet misinformed, adults are the victims of some widely held myths regarding children and grief.

The purpose of this second in a series of two articles is to identify, describe, and dispel ten common myths about children and grief. Providing quality care to bereaved children requires that compassionate adults work to dispel the myths outlined below. Adults who have internalized these myths become incapable of helping

children move toward healing.

These myths are not intended to be all-inclusive or mutually exclusive. Our task is not to condemn adults who have internalized these myths, but to supportively encourage them to broaden their understanding of the complex experiences of children's grief and mourning.

In the previous issue, I discussed Myths 1-5. In this article, I will explore Myths 6-10.

REVIEWING THE MYTHS:

Myth #1: Grief and Mourning are the Same Experience

Myth #2: A Child's Grief and Mourning is Short in Duration

Myth #3: There is a Predictable and Orderly Stage-Like Progression to the Experiences of Grief and Mourning

Myth #4: Infants and Toddlers are Too Young To Grieve and Mourn

Myth #5: The Grief and Mourning of Adults Surrounding Bereaved Children Doesn't Have Any Impact on Them.

Myth #6: The Trauma of Childhood Bereavement Always Leads to a Maladjusted Adult Life

Myth #7: Children are Better Off if They Don't Attend Funerals

Myth #8: Children Who Express Tears are Being

"Weak" and Harming Themselves in the Long Run

Myth #9: Adults Should be Able to Instantly Teach Children About Religion and Death

Myth #10: The Goal in Helping Bereaved Children is to "Get Them Over" Grief and Mourning

DESCRIBING AND DISPELLING MYTHS 6 - 10

Myth #6: The Trauma of Childhood Bereavement Always Leads to a Maladjusted Adult Life

Since the 1930's, numerous studies have attempted to establish relationships between childhood bereavement and later adult "mental illness" (depression, psychosis, sociopathic behavior). While a number of clinicians and researchers have tried to demonstrate this relationship, more recent critical reviews of the research literature have questioned the results. Why? Because there seems to have been a number of methodological problems with the studies. Numerous studies failed to control for such influences as social class, age of parents, and nature of the emotional relationship between the child and the parent that died. Retrospective research has not been able to evolve a definite answer to the question of whether early childhood bereavement (most studies have focused on death of a parent) is able to predict the later onset of mental health problems.

While many studies that attempt to make the above link have been rejected, some well-meaning, misinformed people perpetuate

this myth. You may have witnessed this when you see adults approach bereaved children with a patronizing attitude that projects the following, "You poor child, you will be forever maimed by this experience."

These more recent critical reviews of the literature suggest to keen observers suggest that the death of a parent alone is not necessarily a determinant of later mental health problems. Interestingly, a study by Rutter on maternal deprivation has suggested that psychopathology is not necessarily linked to the parent-child bond, but instead to the lack of bonding initially.

My own clinical experience has resulted in a personal bias on this important issue. I believe the quality of care provided to bereaved children as they are helped to do the work of mourning is a major influence on their healing, or rather what I have termed "reconciliation."

In sum, do not assume that because a child experiences the death of someone that they will have a maladjusted adult life. Instead, work to create societal and familial environments that help them participate in the work of mourning and go on to live meaningful lives!

Myth #7: Children are Better Off if They Don't Attend Funerals

The unfortunate reality is that many adults firmly believe in this myth. The result is that many children are denied the opportunity to confront the reality of the death with the support of loving adults.

Adults who have internalized this myth create an environment that moves children away from grief and mourning prematurely. The funeral provides a structural way of allowing and encouraging

both adults and children to comfort each other, openly mourn and honor the life of the person who has died.

Since the funeral is a significant event, children should have the same opportunity to attend as any other member of the family. They should be encouraged to attend, but never forced.

I emphasize the word "encouraged" because some children are anxious when experiencing anything unknown to them. Through gentle encouragement, loving adults can help bereaved children know they will be supported during this naturally sad and frightening time in their young lives. The funeral can even provide an opportunity for children to express their unique relationship with the person who has died by including a ritual of their own during the service.

Myth #8: Children Who Express Tears are Being "Weak" and Harming Themselves in the Long Run

An important way in which children learn is through the modeling of a primary caregiver. If bereaved children are in an environment where adults are living out this myth, they will often follow suit.

Children may repress their tears either because they have internalized adult demands for repressing feelings, or they have identified with how the adults surrounding them repress their own tears. Unfortunately, many adults associate tears of grief with personal inadequacy and weakness. Crying on the part of bereaved children often generates feelings of helplessness in adults. Out of a wish to protect the children (and themselves) from pain, well-meaning, misinformed adults often directly inhibit the experience of tears. Comments similar to, "You need to be strong

for your mother," or "Tears won't bring him back," and "He wouldn't want you to cry," discourage the expression of tears. Yet crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in the body and allows the child to communicate a need to be comforted.

Another purpose of crying is postulated in the context of attachment theory, wherein tears are intended to bring about reunion with the person who has died. While reunion cannot occur, crying is thought to be biologically based and a normal way of attempting to reconnect with the person who has died. The frequency and intensity of crying eventually wanes as the hoped-for reunion does not occur.

The expression of tears is not a sign of weakness in adults or children. The capacity of bereaved children to share tears is an indication of their willingness to do the "work of mourning." As loving adults we can better assist children by modeling our own expression of tears.

Myth #9: Adults Should be Able to Instantly Teach Children About Religion and Death

Perhaps you have heard an adult say, "I'll just tell them he's gone to Heaven and that will take care of it." If only it were that simple! As one eight-year-old girl said, "If Grandpa is in Heaven, why did we put him in the ground?"

Teaching abstract religious and spiritual concepts is no easy task. Children's capacity to understand will grow with them as they mature. While we can only teach what we believe, be careful not to expect too much of yourself in this important area.

A challenging adult responsibility is to clarify for children abstract ideas about death. Such ideas are often misused to avoid

providing explanations about the nature of the death or to deny feelings. Religious and spiritual belief systems can be sustaining, but children's capacity to assimilate their beliefs over time must be respected. The child need not, and often cannot, understand the total religious philosophy of adults around them. Whatever the specific beliefs of the family, the child must be helped to understand that the person has died and cannot come back.

A sometimes witnessed misuse of religion is to suggest that children need not mourn because the person who died "is in a better place, anyway." To discourage children from mourning in this way can set them up for a multitude of complications in their continued living.

In sum, caring adults need not feel guilty or ashamed if they cannot give specific definitions of God and Heaven, or what happens after death. Openness to mystery is valuable not only in teaching about death, but in teaching anything about life!

Myth #10: The Goal in Helping Bereaved Children is to "Get Them Over" Grief and Mourning

We have all probably had the experience of hearing an adult talk about a bereaved child in the following way: "Shouldn't she be over it by now? I think it's been over a year." To think that we as human beings, adults or children, "get over" grief is ludicrous!

Adults who have internalized this myth often lose the most important quality of an effective caregiver — the loss of patience.

Why? Because they are always trying to get the child "over it." Children don't overcome grief, they live with it and work to "reconcile" themselves to it.

As the child participates in the work of mourning, a natural realization follows that life will be different without the presence of the person who has died. Hope for a continued life emerges as the child is able to make commitments to the future, realizing the dead person will never be forgotten, yet knowing that one's life can and will move forward.

No, children do not get over grief, but instead they become reconciled to it. Those people who think the goal is to "resolve" bereaved children's grief become destructive to the healing process.

Final Thoughts

Again, be aware that the above myths are not intended to be all-inclusive or mutually exclusive. We must supportively encourage people to broaden their understanding of the complex experience of children's grief and mourning.

Being surrounded by adults who believe in these myths invariably results in a heightened sense of isolation and alienation in bereaved children. The inability to be supported in the "work of mourning" destroys much of the capacity to enjoy life, living and loving.

Bereaved children will experience the healing they deserve only when we, both as individuals and a society, are able to dispel these myths!



