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- Wellness
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SURVIVE AND THRIVE

Grieving Children and the Holidays

By Barbara Rubel

Do you feel as though you may not be strong enough to support your grieving child this holiday season? I recently spoke to grieving parents. They believe that they don't have the strengths needed to support their bereaved child. I believe they can spiritually nurture their child if they are brave; have a love of learning; are honest, hopeful; have gratitude; are spiritual; and show their love, as they talk with their child about their expectations for Thanksgiving, Christmas or Chanukah.

Although you struggle with your own feelings of grief and loss, this is the time to be *brave* and confront the difficult task of helping your grieving child. With a *love of learning* something new, this article will increase your awareness on how to help your child based on their understanding of death. For example, although children younger than three years of age have no understanding of the cause or finality of death, they do react to loss. Between the ages of three and five, children grasp the concept of separation, but not death. By seven, children recognize death, including the belief that there is continued life (e.g. loved one is in heaven) apart from the physical body, and are better able to verbally express feelings of loss. For the most part, by nine, children fully understand death.

Your child may be angry at God and question why God let the death happen. Prayer can be beneficial as you both ask similar questions that may never be answered. Be *honest* as you discuss changes in both of your lives. If your child feels punished by God or that God does not care, talk openly about it. By the same token, some children may no longer believe in miracles and feel hopeless. Help them through shared rituals based on your faith, belief system, and culture such as: lighting a candle; planting a flowering bush in their loved one's memory; listening to music; making a collage; or creating a memory box (e.g. painted shoebox) to store keepsakes. Talk about your beliefs and any holiday traditions that they want changed. Compromise accordingly.

As a spiritually aware adult, ask your child questions, such as: *Now that the holidays are here, what are three things you would have liked to tell the person who died? If you could have one item that belonged to your special person what would it be? and How has this holiday season changed since the death?* With a focus on *hope* during the holidays, remain optimistic and have *gratitude* for what you do have in life.

All in all, your child may be struggling with comprehending what's happening and attempting to make meaning out of it. As a *loving* role model, communicate about how your child is: honoring the deceased person's wishes; understanding the circumstances of the loss; and continuing bonds and spiritual connection with the deceased. Dig deep down inside yourself and find the strengths that will make you resilient enough to spiritually nurture your grieving child.

Sibyl Magazine, November 2016, Volume 9, Issue 11. pg. 64.

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