



Helping
CHILDREN
Cope with Death



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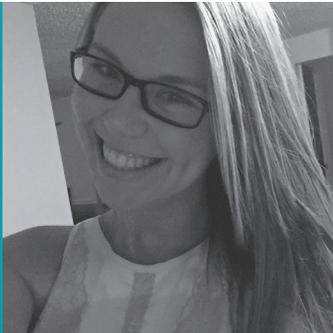
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When my sister Ashley was killed in a crash I was only 9 years-old. I remember the drive to the hospital, the waiting room and finally being allowed to see my sister. I didn't really understand what happened, my parents wanted to protect me so we didn't talk about it. I had always had questions but I didn't want to upset my parents so I didn't ask. It wasn't until years later that I really started to learn more and I used that knowledge to help teach other teens to be drug free. Now, I wish that I had known more at an earlier age. Kids have a natural tendency to blame themselves no matter how things happen. I can remember wishing I had been nicer to my sister the last time I had seen her.

If you are helping a child who has lost a loved one, talk with them, please let them ask questions. Be understanding towards them and reassure them that it's not their fault.

Kahlee Adams

Kahlee's sister Ashley was 17 years-old when she was killed as a passenger in a vehicle driven by a driver impaired by both drugs and alcohol.



How Children View Death

The untimely and violent death of a loved one, and the grieving that follows, is extremely difficult for anyone. It is difficult to accept that no one is immune from danger in the world, that we cannot control the irresponsible actions of others. We would like to tell our children that the world is fair and just, but it is not so. Instead we must try to find the best way to explain to children what has happened.

Mourning a loved one is even more difficult for children compared to adults as they have not been exposed to a lot of death and often learn how to cope by watching adults. Young children view adults as powerful and wise beings who can do anything. Adult “truths” become permanently etched in their impressionable minds. Loving adults do not want children to hurt and may therefore disguise the truth about death. In an effort to protect children, adults may actually harm them.

Many things influence children’s views on death. Age, religious beliefs, cultural or ethnic values, and their relationship to the deceased person are important factors that affect their understanding. However, the reactions of their caregivers are of primary importance in determining how children will cope with death.

Telling children about the death of a loved one in a substance impaired driving crash is the beginning of a long process of sharing. Children, like adults, differ widely in their reactions to death. They are not, however, miniature adults. They have their own distinct ways of perceiving reality and viewing the world. Understanding how children conceptualize death within the context of their prospective age ranges may help parents and caregivers in coping with this process.

Infants and Toddlers

Infants can sense when something is amiss following the death of their primary caregiver. Although a death in the family may affect an infant, the absence of the mother causes a clear biological reaction. It’s most helpful for an infant if another caregiver assumes primary responsibility for the infant’s care quickly. Passing infants from caregiver to caregiver, however, may cause anxiety due to the fluctuation and inconsistency of care and is not recommended.

Older infants may begin to notice that they are separate from their parents or caregivers, and this separation can be frightening. They may grieve for a lost relationship through anger, crying, searching, lack of appetite, and finally, quiet resignation. A child of two years can feel grief and anxiety in their surroundings and will require frequent touching and holding for reassurance.

Infants and toddlers can sense the absence of a primary caregiver.

Because he/she cannot comprehend what death is, explanations of death are meaningless. What one does is far more important than what one says to a child this young. Generally, a grieving infant or toddler needs large doses of tender loving care: holding, cuddling, and stroking. A child this young can only experience the presence or absence of another.

When an infant or toddler loses a loved one who is not a primary caregiver, such as a sibling, an uncle or a close playmate, the child will notice that person is gone. They may ask for them by name. It’s important to use clear and simple language. You can even use the word “dead,” such as Uncle Bob is dead. Or you can say they won’t be coming

back, that they can't eat or drink, or they can't walk and talk any more.

Because children of these ages will likely not remember many of the experiences they have this young, it's a great idea to write down any special interactions they had with a loved one for when they grow older. Save pictures or special toys for them to look at when they are older.

Ages Four to Six

Like infants and toddlers, children this age have a great need for physical nurturing and the security of knowing who will care for them. They are learning to express themselves verbally, but are most effective in expressing themselves through play. Although significant events such as birthdays, holidays, and the first day of school are major milestones to young children, they tend to have a poor concept of time and space.

“Magical thinking” is an important characteristic of four- to six-year old development. A child may fly to the moon, fight monsters, and cook dinner for a hundred guests in the course of a few minutes of play. A child in this age group is capable of a nearly endless variety of fantasies. However, most fantasies are based on something the child has seen or heard, even though it was misunderstood.

Bereaved children in this age group have a limited and literal understanding of death. Their thinking is concrete. A child this age believes that if anything is active, it is alive. A wind-up toy seems alive when it moves, and

a child might cry when it stops performing. A stuffed animal seems alive during play because it has assumed life-like characteristics.

A limited concept of time added to a limited concept of death means that when a loved one dies, the child may expect the deceased to be alive again soon. Children may accept the news of the death in a matter-of-fact manner and may speak of the death or deceased person in the same detached way they speak of a playmate or pet.

If the dead loved one was a parent or caregiver, the child's primary worry will be about who will care for him/her. The child may cry because of disruptions in the household or the reactions of others, rather than thinking of the death itself. Abstract concepts such as “life after death” are beyond his/her thinking ability.

In an effort to understand what has happened, young children will ask all kinds of questions that are sometimes alarming to adults. Questions like, “How will Daddy go to the bathroom?” or “Can we open our presents at the cemetery?” and “When will Grandma come play with me again?” may surprise adults. No matter how appropriate the news of the death, young children will continue to ask questions and make observations that may startle adults. Regardless, they deserve a response.

Sometimes those questions can be hurtful to hear and can be difficult to respond to. You can try to anticipate what some of the questions may be by thinking through what the situation might look like to your child and have a response ready so that you are prepared, and it may provide less of a shock.

Children ages four to six understand death best when explained in physical terms.



Children in this age group may engage in compulsive retelling of the traumatic event in an effort to gain some mastery over it. They may unexpectedly blurt out some aspect of the trauma like, “My Aunt Karen was killed in a car crash” and “My mommy cries sometimes.” Although unexpected, these statements offer good opportunities to gently probe into the child’s feelings and discern the purpose of such an announcement. It may be that the child only needed the sense of mastery that comes with verbalizing it, or that there is some underlying feeling or question that needs to be addressed.

Because thinking is literal and concrete, death may be best explained in physical terms, such as, “His heart stopped beating, and no one can make it start. Because of that we won’t be seeing him move or talk any more. We will bury his body in the ground, because he is not able to do or say anything anymore.”

Be considerate of religious beliefs when talking about the concept of heaven and death.

For children raised in traditions that believe in an afterlife, concepts such as Heaven may be difficult for them to grasp. They will see a discrepancy between burial of the body and the description of “going home” or

“going to Heaven.” While the young child probably cannot grasp the concept, you might address the distinction, as “The part that we loved, the part that smiled, laughed, and loved us, is the part that has gone to Heaven. The body that doesn’t work anymore is what is now in the ground.”

For example if a child is told that a loved one has gone home, or gone away, they often think that person can come back, or that the place they have gone is somewhere the child can go as well.

A child will primarily feel extreme and long lasting sadness for the loss of significant others, such as a parent, grandparent, or sibling. The sadness may stem from feelings of abandonment. The child may conclude that their loved one departed because he/she was bad. A child’s view of morality at this age is that bad behaviors are punished and good behaviors are rewarded. It may be helpful to point out that the loved one did not choose to die, that someone’s bad behavior caused the death

Sometimes children wrongly conclude that a loved one’s death is their fault.

To demonstrate an increased need to be cared for, bereaved children may regress back to younger childish behaviors such as bed-wetting and crying upon separation. Young children will act out their fear and confusion through play and should not be discouraged from doing so. Parents and caregivers can facilitate play by sitting with the child as he/she plays with dolls, puppets, stuffed animals, toy cars, and doll houses. As a parent or caregiver, ask how various dolls or stuffed animals feel during play. Look for aggression in play and explore where the anger is focused. It may be beneficial to have a child see a play therapist to help process their grief.

Because of short attention spans, young bereaved children may not be able to focus on their feelings for extended periods of time, especially those they cannot articulate. A bereaved child may ask about the death one minute, then play happily the next. Parents and caregivers must realize that periods of play do not mean the child has come to terms with the loss, but are expressions of that loss or respites from their feelings.

Ages Seven to 12

Children ages seven to 12 are primarily oriented to family, although they begin to relate to and gain identity from their peers. Play remains a mode of self-expression, although children this age express themselves quite well verbally, especially feelings such as mad, glad and sad. They begin to grasp more abstract concepts such as truth, time, space and death, although magical thinking still plays a role.

Around the ages of seven or eight, children attribute life more to movements in nature, and not so much to inanimate objects like toys. A cloud is alive as it blows across the sky. Water is alive when it gurgles and runs in a stream.

Seven or eight year olds frequently become fearful of death because they realize for the first time that it is real. No matter who dies, they may feel devastated at the thought of losing a parent. Obviously, the death of a parent is extremely traumatic at this age. Some of their questions may allude to fears of their own death. Death seems to be an attacker who takes life.

Although able to understand the finality of death, many of the factors of early

childhood still apply. It is important for children of this age to express their sadness, anger, fear and guilt.

Because they now understand that people die, they may become interested in what

happens after death. As they begin to relate to some of the mysteries of life, they are able to relate to some of the mysteries of death. A child of this age is concerned not only about death as a concept, but also about the mechanisms of death.

**Children
age seven to
twelve begin to
understand the
reality of death.**



HOPE

They may ask questions about why the person died or seek information about who or what caused the death. They will then direct anger toward the someone or something that caused it. If the child wants to talk about how the crash happened, you can explain some of the events, like the substance impaired driving crash that caused the death.

A child may not understand what a “drunk or drugged driver” is. You can explain how alcohol and drugs are different from milk or juice. You can explain that alcohol or drugs can make a person feel sick, dizzy and unable to stand or walk straight. Explain that a driver’s ability to drive was affected by the alcohol or other drugs. Focus upon one component of the crash at a time.

Although children this age can easily express glad, mad and sad, their magical thinking may also lead to guilt feelings regarding their role in the death. Children may become mad and, at some point, may have wished to eliminate their parents and/or siblings while alive and may have even thought of different ways to do it. The child in this age group may believe that their “death wish” actually caused the death. Children are more susceptible to feelings of guilt than adults or adolescents, since children cannot call upon intellectual resources to persuade themselves of their innocence. It is important to reinforce over and over again that they did not cause the

crash, and free expression of guilt should be encouraged.

The child of this age is similar to that of four to six years olds as they also may fear that death is a punishment for improper behavior. They may fear that naughty behavior has brought about the death of a loved one, and that they are likely to be punished for it. They may also believe that they or another loved one will be the next to die. Because the child simply cannot understand death in the intellectual level of adults, it is difficult to rid themselves of feelings of anger, fear and guilt.

It is not unusual for a child in this age range to feel some shame regarding the death of a loved one. They may feel different from other children their age and may resist or become angry with questions that relate to the death such as, “What do your parents do for a living?” if a parent has died, or “How many brothers and sisters do you have?” if a sibling has died. Shame and confusion move to the forefront of their grief.

At this age, children are not only sensitive to their own feelings, but also to the feelings of others. As a result, they understand what the loss may mean to others. In short, they are able to empathize. The child in the upper end of this range not only needs support and comfort, but can also be a source of support and comfort to others. Opportunities to be helpful to others during the crisis can actually help the child deal

with his/her own feelings.

Word of caution: Children ages 10 through 12 can also take on the burden of responsibility if a caregiver has died. They may feel responsible for younger siblings. A boy or girl may try to take the role of the father or mother they have lost in the home. Watch for this behavior. Although being supportive and encouraging to younger siblings is a good thing there is a fine line between them taking on too much responsibility and no longer experiencing their childhood.

One type of relationship in particular, the relationship between siblings, is unique. When a sibling dies, children may feel like they lost a best friend, a playmate and someone who loves and comforts them. Siblings often share a similar history and experience, building bonds that can potentially last a lifetime. Even at their worst, sibling relationships are significant and can negatively impact the life of a surviving sibling when the relationship is severed. Perhaps the most profound effects of the death of a sibling are the changes in the functioning and the structure of the family. When a child dies, parents are overcome with grief and may have difficulty performing their respective roles as a caregiver. Surviving children are left wondering what is going on or what they should do. Sometimes their response to a death seems inappropriate to adults, and children can develop a sense that their grief is wrong. Ultimately they may begin to feel that they don't belong or that they don't fit in.

In some families, a surviving child may become a target for a parent's anger over



the death of a child. In other families, a surviving child may be overprotected by a parent's intense fear of losing another child or neglected all together as the parent focuses on the death of the other child. Still other parents may prohibit any discussion regarding the child who died. A grieving child's response to the death of a brother or sister is heavily dependent, then, upon interactions with parents or other caregivers.

thoughts and feelings.

Reassure children as they bring up their fears. However irrational their fears may seem, attempt to view them in terms of a child's development. A child can usually accept explanations when he/she knows there is adequate support from a parent or caregiver. Responses to fears that are direct, simple, and clear, accompanied by touching and holding, are the best responses.

A child will reprocess their grief feelings at each developmental level in their lives.

Understand that children frequently substitute feelings they can handle for those they cannot. They may giggle or laugh at things that are not funny. It is important to view this behavior as adaptive coping.

No matter how comfortable a child becomes with an age-appropriate explanation of death, he/she will reprocess the experience and his/her feelings about it at each developmental level, throughout his/her lifetime. As a child matures, he/she will need additional information about the deceased and the circumstances surrounding the death. The child will need additional time, space, and opportunity to grieve and grow.

Helping Children Cope

Show Love

Children young and old need expressions of love to help them through difficult times. Parents and caregivers may want to offer a lot of touching or holding to help the child feel secure. Telling a child you love them regularly can be very helpful, and may also encourage them to express how they feel.

Respond to Children's Feelings

It is very important to respond appropriately to children's feelings. Younger children may be less able to express themselves verbally, but may do so through their actions. With older children, it is useful for parents and caregivers to encourage free expression of thoughts and feelings.

Children may express sadness, fear and anger, all of which are to be expected. A child may cry, which is perfectly natural. Do not be afraid of tears and do not attempt to hurry them along. Anger may be acted out in physically appropriate ways, such as running outside or stuffing newspapers in a trash bag. When a child appears to be feeling a particular way, ask him/her how they are feeling. The best way for a child to become comfortable in sharing his/her thoughts and feelings is for a parent or caregiver to be open in sharing his/her own

Spend Time Playing Together

Children often communicate their deepest feelings through actions. It is best, therefore, to respond to their feelings with actions. Parents and caregivers may support their children by taking time to sit down and play with them, not guiding the play, but allowing them to express whatever they want through the use of toys. Responses like, "Your doll got angry when his Daddy left," and "Your doll is crying in the bed. What is she sad about?" are affirming and encourage children to work through their grief.

Understand the Importance of Missed Events

If Dad had been teaching his son how to cast a line or how to pitch a tent, and then died, this may be the focus of much of the child's concern. It may seem that he is more upset over fishing and camping than over the loss of his father. This is not the case, but it is the way young children are more able to express loss. The child needs sympathy and support for the feelings and not criticism or rejection because of the manner in which they are expressed.

Protect Children from the Emotional Collapse of Parents or Caregivers

While sharing as much of the family crisis as possible, protect the child from witnessing an emotional collapse on the part of one on whom he/she depends. Children can usually handle feelings of sorrow, loneliness and anger, but to witness an emotional collapse will bring on unnecessary anxiety and insecurity. Ask the child how he/she feels about your sadness. This will help them with their own feelings.

Protecting children from the emotional collapse of an adult is important, yet sending children off to spend long periods of time with other relatives or friends may be destructive. It is better not to spare children the reality of what is happening. Children need to learn that they can experience the death of a loved one without completely falling apart.

However, they also need to feel secure in the knowledge that while they learn how to grieve, there will be a parent or caregiver there to care for them. If a parent or caregiver is not fully equipped to care for their child, it is appropriate for them to be cared for by

another responsible adult for a short period of time.

Talk About the Death

Honest and appropriate answers to children's questions about death are best, particularly those that are developmentally appropriate. Like adults, children may experience a great deal of ambivalence about the finality of death. Children may insist that their loved one is alive or that the loved one was seen breathing or opening their eyes in the casket.

Help children to understand that physical death, in itself, does not hurt. The family is crying because they hurt inside. The sadness comes from the fact that a relationship that meant so much to everyone has now been lost.

Reinforce the fact to young children that their loved one did not choose to die. In life, people are given choices, and some make bad choices, such as using alcohol or other drugs and then driving. These choices can hurt and kill other people. It is no one's fault except the person who made the bad choice.

Write down ways you answer your child's questions about death. If kept in a journal, these responses can be used later as a reference for future discussions. Communicate with school personnel, extended family, and friends regarding your way of explaining death. If they understand your philosophy, confusing messages can be avoided.

Use caution when communicating with younger children, as they are concrete thinkers. Making statements like, "To die is to go to sleep" may frighten a child, fearing that if he/she goes to sleep that he/she will die too. A statement like, "Your daddy has gone away for a very long time" may leave a child feeling abandoned, and

Reinforce to children that their loved one did not choose to die.

Ask a child how he/she feels about your sadness.

may leave him/her with the anticipation that daddy will return.

Allow Children to Share Experiences of Memorial Observances

Allow children the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service. This confronts them with the reality that death has occurred and helps them acknowledge their loss. It is important to give a child time prior to the funeral to view the body and say goodbye in his/her own way.

Older children need detailed information about what to expect at the funeral. Perhaps they will want to visit with the funeral home director who can answer questions. Although children should be encouraged to attend funerals, they should never be forced. Likewise, they should not be forced to kiss or touch the deceased, although it is perfectly appropriate if they wish to do so.

Allow children to share experiences of remembrance, such as going to the cemetery. Going to the cemetery works against avoidance, denial and repression of painful feelings. The sadness felt in that place may help the child move through his/her grief.

Children need concrete ways of expressing themselves. It may be important for children to take flowers, letters or other gifts to the cemetery. Encourage the child to write a goodbye letter to the deceased. The letter can be taken to the cemetery and buried or placed with a flower arrangement.

If the funeral has passed, and children did not participate for whatever reason, it is

not too late to remedy the situation. Ask a trusted clergy person or the funeral director

Encourage children to express themselves without forcing them to.



to conduct a short, simple memorial service just for children. Invite all the children who might like to come. Perhaps it can be held at the grave site, and the children can take photos in remembrance.

Children may want objects, clothing, or a photograph of the loved one. Do not worry if they want to take these objects to bed with them. Making up games that begin with, “Remember when” or “Do you remember” to facilitate expression of feelings may offer additional ways to remember the person who died.

Remember Your Loved Ones at Holidays

Like you, children will be especially aware of the absent loved one around holidays and will want to find ways to include the deceased in the festivities. Young children especially mark time by the passage of holidays. You may not feel much like celebrating, but the maintenance of tradition is important. Nevertheless, even young children will understand that things have changed and may have some ideas of ways to do things differently if following family traditions will be too painful.

Take Care of Yourself as Parent or Caregiver

Caring for a bereaved child may be painful and time-consuming. Realize that you, too, are moving through various phases of grief, just like the children. However, you will rarely be at the same place they are at the same time.

Take care of yourself. Attend victim support groups, write in a journal, or seek counseling for a while. The best thing you can do for your child is to deal with your own bereavement in a healthy way.

If you have questions or concerns or would like additional support in helping your child cope with death, call a local hospice, grief center, local MADD chapter, your child's guidance counselor at school, or a mental health professional. Many hospital social work departments can refer you to appropriate programs or professionals. Funeral directors and faith-based community leaders are also good resources.

**Reach out
to your
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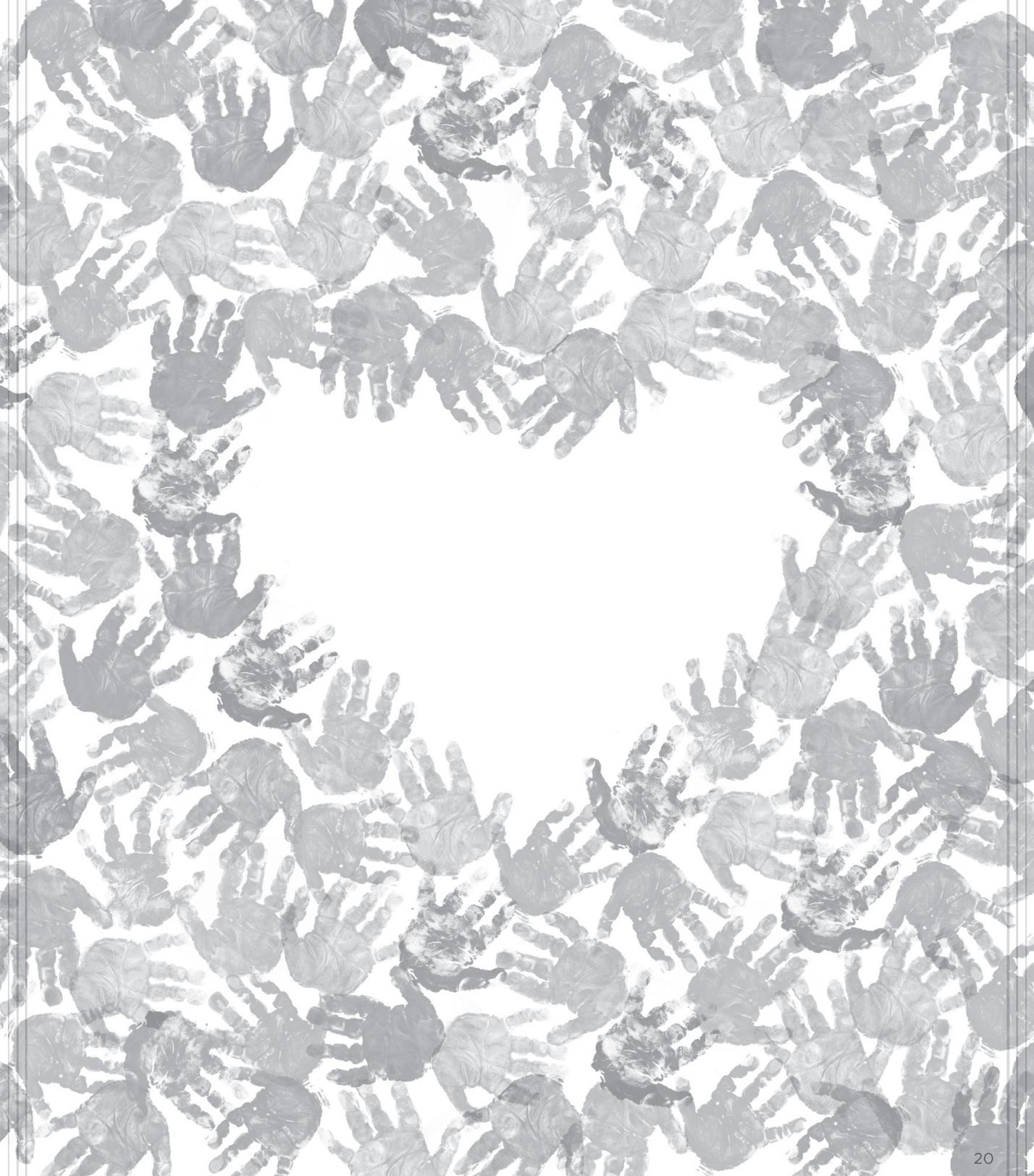
Get Back Into a Routine

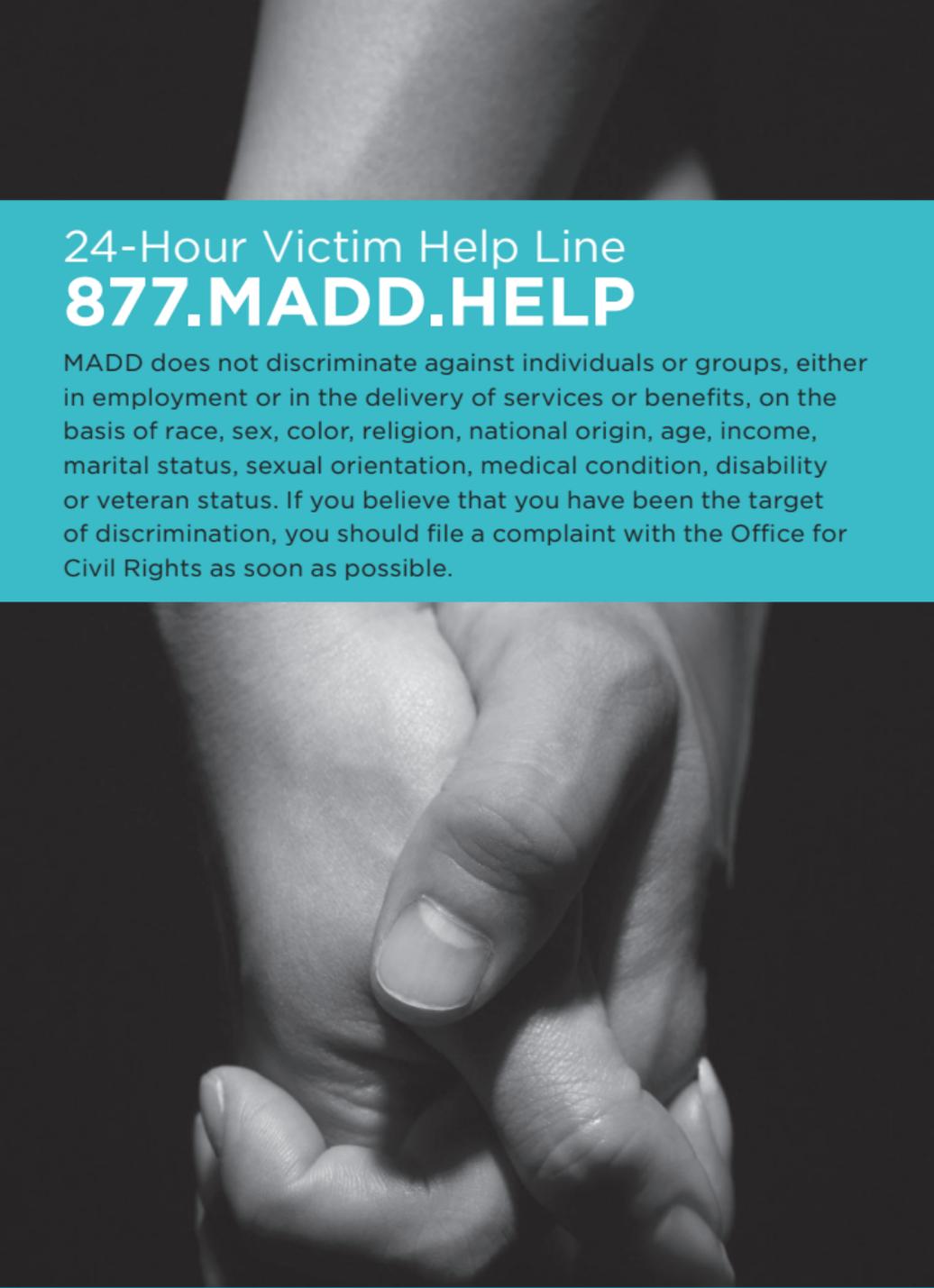
Children thrive in routines. Routines establish safe expectations for them and can help children cope after the chaos of a crash. Going through the simple routine of getting ready for bed, taking a bath, and reading a book can help to start re-establishing a feeling of normalcy. Try to get the children back into a routine as soon as possible with regular times for waking, sleeping, eating and going to school.

Final Thoughts

Grieving is a necessary part of living. Much of how a child grieves is determined by the influence of parents and primary caregivers. An environment that fosters open, honest communication offers bereaved children security during their waves of yearning, sadness, anger and guilt. They will undoubtedly experience the pain associated with grief and mourning, yet will be able to express their feelings and resolve any difficult issues. They will learn to cope with grief. The coping skills they master today will remain with them throughout adulthood. Lessons in grief and healing are precious gifts you can give the children in your life.

If you are looking for further information, or to talk with someone, please call the **24-Hour Victim Help Line at 1-877-MADD-HELP (877-623-3435)** to be connected to a MADD Victim Advocate who will be ready and willing to listen and help. You can also visit us online at **madd.org/help**.





24-Hour Victim Help Line **877.MADD.HELP**

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