

THE THREE TASKS FACING CHILDREN IN GRIEF

WHEN SOMEONE IN A CHILD'S LIFE DIES, A CHILD GRIEVES. A CHILD'S GRIEVING IS, IN ACTUALITY, A CHILD'S TACKLING AND MASTERING THREE SIGNIFICANT TASKS. EACH CHILD HAS AN INNER DRIVE TO MASTER THESE TASKS IN ORDER TO REGAIN A SENSE OF WELL-BEING AFTER A DEATH HAS OCCURRED.

the 1st task

A child wants *to understand* what has happened when a death has occurred.

This is a thinking task.

- How to help:
- Tell the truth.
 - Use the words "death" and "dead."
 - Answer a child's questions, maybe over and over again.
 - Admit when you don't know the answer by saying so.
 - Allow a child to make speculations about information that is not known, and label them as so.
 - Give a child choices about his/her involvement in the dying process, the viewing, the service and in other events during which they can learn about what has happened.
 - Know that children may grieve over and over again as they grow older developmentally, and are able to understand more.

the 2nd task

A child wants *to express feelings* about the death. This is a feeling task.

When 1) the "goneness" of someone who has died is felt, and 2) the children experience the grief of the adults in their lives—then children have an emotional and physical response.

- How to help:
- Listen, accept and care.
 - Keep a child safe. Maintain standards of discipline.
 - Do not let children hurt themselves or others. If they do so continually, seek professional help.
 - Make available outlets for the big energy of feelings: sports, active play, loud voices, hitting pillows.
 - Lower expectations of children at school and at home, because grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy.
 - Understand that children may feel and act younger when they are grieving.
 - Understand that children may be physically vulnerable—i.e. illness- and accident-prone—while they are grieving.

the 3rd task

A child wants *to continue to live fully in the present and open up to the future.*

This is a practical task.

- How to help:
- Allow children to play hard, laugh hard, and have fun even as they mourn, for this is not disloyal. In fact, it is through this play that children can be restored.
 - Hold the vision of a child's healing. Have faith, even when they do not, that they will regain a sense of well-being.