



Disciplining the Grieving Child (ages 7+) By Skylar Lenox, BA and Michelle Post, MA, LMFT

Children “act out” to bring attention to their needs. It does not matter if they have experienced the death of someone close or not. However, when the child has experienced the death of someone close, it is important to address their grief as much as their mistakes. After a death, help children to draw about their feelings, write down their thoughts, and talk about the changes they have undergone since the death. By allowing the child to express their feelings on a regular basis the child is less likely to have sudden, intense emotional outbursts.

Be aware that children express their grief differently from adults. One of the more common ways of expression is for the child to “act out.” For example, they may not listen to parental figures, or they may throw tantrums or destroy property. After a death, it can be hard for parents or guardians – who are also grieving – to know an appropriate way to discipline their grieving child. Some parents feel that the child has “gone through enough already” and use little or no discipline, while other parents treat the outburst as if it has nothing to do with grief and do not give the emotional support the child needs. Yet, studies have shown that when parents keep their grieving children accountable for their negative actions, the children have an easier time overall coping with the death (Worden). Children and teens have told us that these boundaries and rules help children feel safe and cared for by their guardians.

Children will most likely not connect their outbursts with their grief. Therefore, it may take longer to defuse the situation and to appropriately reprimand the child for their negative action than before the child experienced the death of someone close. Here are some ideas about how to respond to a child who is exhibiting negative behavior:

1. The adult in charge should take the child to a safe place (it is best to identify this safe place before an outburst occurs).
2. Immediately let the child know that the behavior is not acceptable and that the child is still loved and cared for. A grieving child will act out as an emotional test. By making it clear that the caregiver still loves and cares about them, the child will feel safe.
3. Allow the child to express aggression through art or writing (the Crayola Color Wonder is good for this as the color only shows up on special paper). Physical aggression (such as punching a pillow) has been shown to increase anger instead of alleviate it, but it does work for others (teaching them healthy and safe ways to express anger).
4. Once the child has calmed down, start to ask questions about why they acted out. Instead of overtly asking “Is this because your dad died?” ask questions like, “Did you used to [activity before outburst] do that with your dad?” or “It seems to me like your feelings have been a little out of control since your Mom died. What do you think?” Whatever questions are asked, make sure they are appropriate for the child’s intellect and understanding. Often times “I don’t know” will be the answer to these questions. This is the time when the discipliner can share observations of the child’s coping mechanisms: “I see that you are using your body instead of words to show your anger.” “When you get so upset that you start to throw a tantrum, it is hard for me to help you.”
5. After a dialogue between the child and the caregiver has occurred, the caregiver must discipline the child. The discipline must fit the negative behavior. The most effective disciplines are ones that allow the child to make amends for their mistakes; for example, cleaning up a room that they messed up or helping with dinner when they caused the caregiver to run late because the child refused to listen. The caregiver should help the child with the discipline to help the child think of other ways to express anger. The caregiver should be in the room while the discipline is being carried out.

Resources and Books:

Schaefer, D., & Lyons, C (2001). *How Do We Tell The Children?* New York, United States: New Market Press.
Worden, J. W. (1996). *Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*. New York, United States: Guilford Press.