

Child, Adolescent and Teen Homicide Survivors: The Forgotten Griefers

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Imagine having your childhood violently disrupted because someone you love has been killed. Having a loved one die from an act of violence is undoubtedly one of the most traumatic experiences that a person will ever face. Homicide induces complicated grief, as the normal stages of grief are constantly interrupted. Contributing factors of complicated grief are: suddenness of the unexpected death, the fact that the deceased may have suffered, navigating the legal system and the possibility that the perpetrator may not be apprehended or convicted (Children and Homicide, 2009).

Young people often have additional stress as a result of their caregivers withdrawing to deal with their own traumatic grief. Sometimes the lack of emotional support may be more devastating for the children than the homicide itself (Children and Homicide, 2009). Young people's reactions to complicated grief can differ from adults because their coping skills are underdeveloped. Young homicide survivors' reactions to grief may include: suicidal thoughts, self-harm, isolation, violent behaviors, questioning relevance of life, becoming overly compliant, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, or pressure to take on more of an adult role. They may suffer from nightmares, experience terror rather than sadness and loss, and have feelings of rage or guilt.

Some of the myths associated with young homicide survivors:

Myth:

Children are resilient; they will get over it quickly.

Reality:

Children experience grief at different stages of their lives. A child that loses a loved one at the age of five, may begin acting out as a teenager if his/her grief is unresolved.

Myth:

If a child is not acting out negatively, then they are handling the death well.

Reality:

Overachieving after the violent death of a loved one is a symptom of complicated grief that can cause severe stress and anxiety.

Myth:

Children are too young to understand the circumstances surrounding homicide.

Reality:

Children understand far more than adults give them credit for. Parents have to use their best judgment when deciding how much detail about the death they should disclose, or whether or not a child should attend the funeral or court proceedings. If a parent does decide to allow children to attend a funeral or court proceedings, then they will want to spend a great deal of time preparing them for what will take place. This would include details about what to expect, taking them to the funeral home/church or courthouse before the actual event, and answering any questions they may have.

Myth:

It's okay to help keep a child on track by using the deceased as a bargaining tool.

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Reality:

This causes more stress for the child by making them think that their deceased loved one may be disappointed in them.

Myth:

It's okay not to tell the child how their loved one died because it might scare them.

Reality:

It is better to be honest about the nature of the death so that the child feels that they can trust what they are being told. Describe what happened in a way that they can understand at their level. You don't have to give graphic details.

Activities that help young homicide survivors talk about their feelings:

Ages 3-6 years

- Puppets - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving and developing coping skills
- Doll house - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving and developing coping skills
- Drawing - helps with expressing feelings

Ages 7-11 years

- Drawing - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving and developing coping skills
- Journaling - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving and developing coping skills
- Creating Feelings Chain (*strips of construction paper, with emotions written on them, formed and connected like a chain link using staples or glue*) - helps with expressing feelings
- Creating Feelings Mask (*paper-mâché masks with the feelings that they express to people drawn/painted on the outside. How they really feel is*

drawn/painted on the inside) - helps with expressing feelings

- Memory Boxes- (*white cigar shaped box decorated and contains symbols or objects from deceased loved one's life*) - memorial activity
- Collage (*use pictures and words from magazines to create a commemorative tribute to their loved one*) - memorial activity

Ages 12-18 years

- Drawing - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving and developing coping skills
- Journaling - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving and developing coping skills
- Creating song or poem - helps with expressing feelings
- Memory Boxes - (*white cigar shaped box decorated and contains symbols or objects from deceased loved one's life*) - memorial activity
- Collage - (*use pictures and words from magazines to create a commemorative tribute to their loved one*)-memorial activity
- Memory Quilt - (*using loved one's clothing, fabric from furniture, jewelry, etc. to make a quilt*) -memorial activity.
- Talking or facilitated discussion - helps with expressing feelings, problem solving, developing coping skills and memorializing loved one

Playing board games or card games are a great way to help young people relax and open up.

Conclusion

It is important to realize that young people are unique and may express their grief in different ways at different stages

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of their development. Keep in mind that it is important to communicate with caregivers so that they can become better equipped to help the youth cope with their loss. Acknowledging the caregivers' feelings and suggesting tips for self-care can be an important part of their healing process.

References

Children and Homicide. Retrieved June 15, 2008, from
http://www.azhomicidesurvivors.org/images/Children_and_Homicide.doc

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