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TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH GRIEVING KIDS

1 LISTEN, TRULY LISTEN

Talking is not always helpful; listening is. Silence can invite more sharing. Advice or comments are not always necessary; often the child just needs to be heard. Actively listen by repeating what you hear them say to ensure you are understanding them correctly by using phrases like "I hear you" and "Tell me more." Let them know you heard them, for example, "Wow, it sounds like you had a really tough day at school."

2 BE PRESENT

Life is busy and distracting, so being present is harder than it sounds. When your children are talking, especially about their concerns, pay attention and be present with your eyes, ears, and your full self. A child once said, "I want my mom's undivided attention, you know, not thinking about 50 other things at once." Try to stay tuned in to them.

3 POSE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

To encourage more sharing, avoid asking questions that have yes, no, or other single word answers. For example, a good alternative to "How was your day?" is "Tell me one good thing that happened today." Give them time to respond. While who, what, when, and where questions show your interest in your child, try not to be intrusive or take over the conversation. Instead, stay gently curious, such as "What is that like for you?" or "What else happened?"

4 FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Instead of asking your children specific questions that you want answered, let them take the lead in the conversation. Pick up on what they are saying and engage with them in what they want to talk about. Name and validate the child's feelings by reflecting back the feeling they are expressing, such as "Sounds like you felt really lonely." We can't fix or take away their pain, but we can validate their painful feelings. And if they don't want to talk, that's okay too.

5 BE AUTHENTIC

It's okay to show and to respond to your child with real emotion. Model for them by sharing how you are feeling, for example, "I feel really sad too, especially when I hear that song." Such expressions can be helpful in showing children that strong emotions can co-exist with the ability to keep on living. Genuine responses usually make children want to share more.

6 LISTEN AND TALK DURING THE "IN-BETWEEN" TIMES

Sometimes great conversations happen during the "in-betweens" of life, like driving, walking, doing an activity together, or at bed time because of the parallel position; the parent and child aren't looking each other right in the eye. Talking side-by-side with your child can create a strong connection.

10

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7 HONESTY MATTERS

Children are better at handling the truth of a situation than we might think. When we tell children the truth in simple, developmentally appropriate language, we build trust and model for them that they too can be honest with us. Being honest also can mean sharing that you do not have all of the answers, and that is okay. If we want children to develop good coping skills, it starts with knowing the truth about a situation.

8 TAKE TIME TO SHARE

Busy families often lack the time to sit and talk with each other, so create conversation times and rituals, which might include an activity like playing a board game. By having a set time that works for you - either daily, weekly, or monthly - it creates a culture and a safe time for sharing. Adults can initiate sharing too by talking about themselves, rather than just questioning. This often triggers ideas for children to share about themselves.

9 MAKE CONVERSATIONS PLACES OF COMFORT

When your children talk with you, you want them to feel heard, and perhaps relieved, inspired, or recharged, rather than guilty or a source of disappointment to you. Ask what they may want or need from you, such as advice, help solving a problem, or simply listening. Offer your ear as well as words of encouragement and soften strong reactions like anger or frustration.

10 BE SPONTANEOUS!

Do the unexpected and mix things up, like doing homework in the park or watching a movie together on a school night. These unexpected shared opportunities can generate fun, a sense of connection that is the basis for more talking and sharing, and create new memories.

REMEMBER...

Communication is difficult, and no one is perfect. These 10 tips are just suggestions, not absolute "must dos." Find what works for your child, for you, and for your routines. And if a child chooses not to talk, simply respect that and let them know that you are always available to them.