

When Our Children Are Grieving

Cindy's tears started over her 4th grade social studies assignment, but her tears were not about the report due on Switzerland. Under normal circumstances a report on anything would be easy for Cindy, a piece of cake. However, when something emotionally disturbing happens, normal, everyday events become difficult, sometimes impossible. Cindy's disturbance came from a series of losses. She moved from her Dad's home in Arizona to live with her mother, leaving her brother and all her friends behind. Her favorite grandmother came to visit yet stayed only a few days, just as Cindy was getting close to sharing her fears. Now she was faced with a report due on Monday, with no one at home able to help her. Her mother was sick, and her Step-Dad was busy taking care of the new baby. Her tears were real, and so was her fear, her sense of loss, and her frustration.

El Dorado County may have a number of children dealing with emotional issues right now. For some the catalyst may have been the recent tragedy at Schnell School or the unexpected death of the teacher at Indian Creek School. For others, like Cindy, it may simply be life events. It is important to remember we all can help.

Young children normally express their emotions well. There are buckets of tears and showers of laughter. While tempers may flair quickly, they often cease just as suddenly when their thoughts turn to the next item to catch their eye - a butterfly, a puppy, a toy. The anger is forgotten and life moves on.

How adults deal with and process events has a profound impact on the way young children deal with the same situation, since children may unconsciously mimic the mood of a close adult. Therefore, it is important to remain calm and to react with positive, supporting comments. An adult's prevailing mood of sadness or anger may lead a child to respond similarly.

While young children may understand they are in the middle of a crisis, they may not fully recognize what it entails or why there is so much reaction to it. Again, they will look to adults for clues. Nightmares, unusual fears, or regression in behavior are not unusual in these situations. Reassurance that they are safe is one of the strongest messages adults can send. While words are enough support for some children, most need and benefit from extra time with parents, family, and other caring individuals.

Although older children are more likely to understand the nature of a crisis, it may still be difficult for them to deal with their emotions, reacting in ways that neither the child nor the adult understands. It is important for adults to ask or respond to questions that can help the child process what has happened: What does this feel like? Do you know where the tears are coming from? Do you know what is causing the upset? What would help you feel better? Ask the questions without having your own answers. Let children express their emotions rather than take on yours. The concern may be about safety or just knowing someone is there and willing to let them grieve and express surfacing emotions. Adults should be careful not to impose their own emotions on the children or to trivialize their reactions. These emotions are real to them - as real as yours are to you.

Crisis brings out a variety of responses in people of all ages. Focusing on positive outcomes, as well as providing support and compassion, provides for a more positive and effective outcome. Sadness is normal. Dealing with crisis and grief with effective strategies helps everyone, whether child or adult.