

“Hands-On” Holiday Activities for Grieving Young People

From the article by Louise M. Aldrich, originally printed in the Fall 1994 issue of Thanatos, a publication of the Florida Funeral Directors Service.

Reflecting back on over 20 years of teaching experience, I taught with the firm premise that the more actively involved a child was in his or her own learning, the more the child would discover and progress. As a children's bereavement counselor, I also believe that the more children are actively involved in their own grief process, the greater the opportunity for healing.

The winter holidays are a special time for children. They eagerly anticipate the exchange of gifts, family gatherings, and special snacks. But if you are a young person who has experienced the death of a sister/brother, parent/grandparent, aunt/uncle, or if one of your classmates, friends or teachers has died recently, it will also be a time to reflect on holidays of the past. Remembering the past, and coping with the present holiday can be difficult for young people, but the more grieving activities we encourage children to be a part of, the more it will assist them in mourning and coping with the death.

To insure success in working with your young person, it is helpful to think of the young person's cognitive abilities. Age-appropriate activities of all types are effective when first discussed with the young person. All children need a sense of leadership, along with a sense

of assurance in beginning new activities. Encourage your child to be a part of the activity, inviting him or her to make the choice. Their involvement and ownership of the activity are a must. No young person, no matter what the age, wants to feel pressured into a new activity, where they may think they'll feel vulnerable and not sure of the outcome. Support your young person as the planning of the activity commences, asking for innovative responses from all the young people involved. A continued building of the child's self-esteem is a must in grief activities. They need to know they are doing the right thing, especially if the activity brings sadness. But sadness discussed with a caring adult can help heal a child, and assist him or her to realize being sad is a part of the healing process.

The first recommended activity utilizes a big empty undecorated gift box, along with pieces of wrapping paper, and plenty of ribbons and bows. Everyone should decide on the styles and colors of paper, ribbons and bows, which will be used by all members of the family to decorate the gift box. Another great idea would be to use plain white wrapping paper and all can assist one another in creating a holiday print. The box should be wrapped so that the top can be removed. Into this box family members can place small pieces of

paper upon which they have written how the deceased was a gift to them. This activity recognizes the fact that we can be a gift to someone when we teach them a new thing, be with them when they are afraid, support them, do their chores, etc. All younger children will need help with this project. They need to be encouraged to draw pictures if they can't write. If they can read and write, support them as they read their gift to the family just before the holiday. The box will be opened as all family members gather together, when everyone can discuss, share, and remember the memories.

In a family that celebrates Christmas, putting up a stocking for a deceased family member is an ever-present way to keep the deceased's memory alive. As the stocking is hung, each person can remember a good quality of the deceased. Sharing memories of the person assists a child's self-image. By remembering the deceased, we are role-modeling to them that this is a family, we love and remember each person in our family, and that each family member is important, whether alive or dead. Young people, whether preschool or adolescents, know that they themselves count as a family member and people will remember them.

Dinner is a festive occasion, where children and adolescents can be actively involved in making decorations for the table. The decorations may include holiday items that have a photo of the deceased or holiday decorations that include a photo of all the family members, living and deceased. A place setting can also be made for the deceased and in the gala mood of the

holiday, a toast can be made to the deceased that his or her memory lives on. A family photo wreath can be decorated for the middle of the table with decorations made by all family members placed on it.

A special candle can be lit on holidays to remember the deceased. As the candle shines, everyone shares a memory of the deceased at a previous holiday, and perhaps how much they miss that person. As children share and sometimes cry, they are supported again by caring members of a family who acknowledge grief and sadness. Thus they can mourn together.

Youngsters and adolescents can be involved in a special table that is set aside in memory of the deceased. On the table are placed various remembrances of the deceased, a photo, a card from the deceased, or perhaps a gift the deceased had given to a member of the family. The practice can be started a few days before the holiday and continued to the day of the holiday. These memory tables are great because contributors to the table do not have to say much. The object speaks for itself, and creates a conversation among family members on its own. Each day is an anticipation of what new joy will be added to the table.

Writing or drawing about a past holiday is not only very advantageous for academic development, but for the grief process as well. Young people and adolescents can create stories about past holiday memories. Being encouraged to write a biography or poem about the deceased member of the family can significantly assist a youngster and facilitate their own feelings about this death. Creating past

memories in written form can crystallize our experiences. A young daughter entitled her contribution "Favorite Hanukkahs With My Mother." In this story, she captured all the organization, detail, and love that her mother displayed for her family during Hanukkah.

Many times a deceased parent had the special task of decorating the house with holiday decorations. Maybe he or she was the organizer or planner. Maybe a special small tree could be set up in their honor with some of the special decorations that the deceased purchased or made. Children could make decorations from paper and might like to draw special memories of the deceased parent. Making a small chain of remembrance can be hung on this tree or throughout the house.

Giving a monetary gift to a local charitable organization is an excellent way to remember a deceased member of a family. Any amount of money is gladly accepted by a charitable organization and it has a special meaning when given in memory of a deceased family member. A local hospice may be in need of funds for caring for dying patients or perhaps needs funds for a children's bereavement program. It will mean a lot to a young person to choose the organization, make the donation, fill out the donation card, and deliver it to the special organization. A feeling of importance and worth will be enhanced with pride for remembering their deceased family member or a friend in such a unique way. The money may be collected in a basket, a tin can, a hat from the deceased's clothes, or a container that the deceased owned.

Money from the children can be from allowances, gifts, or extra movie or snack money that wasn't used. A tradition can be made of this giving annually at each holiday or birthday.

A visit to the cemetery is helpful for children to be nurtured by family members in a family setting. During the visit, plans for the holiday can be discussed aloud or written on a piece of paper and a hole can be dug and it can be covered over with dirt near the headstone. Bringing a small Christmas tree decorated by the young people can certainly be an anticipated event for children, and they can organize and plan what they would like to include as their remembrance. Ownership in any activity creates more active participation.

Baking holiday cookies, with adult supervision, for nursing homes, hospitals, and the homeless, can be an experience a child won't forget. Buying and wrapping presents for the needy, and then delivering them, will be a unique opportunity for a youngster to count his or her blessings. Buying clothing for a nursing home that is the exact size and favorite color formerly worn by the deceased adult is a great reminder to children that they have donated something of personal significance, in the deceased's name, to someone less fortunate. It is important to encourage the children, at the time the gifts are given, to write about the person in whose name the memorial donations were made. A discussion of blessings is also very important for adults, as well as children, after one returns from visiting the people for whom the gifts were given or prepared.

The more actively involved children are in their own grief and participating in activities for holidays now, the less resistance they will have in the future for additional grieving activities. Using these ideas or other creative ones from

young people, we, as adults, can learn to share our feelings about death. Young people and adults can have their feelings validated through these sharing sessions. Adults can learn a lot about the openness and honesty of children.



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