

Activities for Grieving Children

1. Feelings: Ask the children to remember how they felt before the death occurred, and then how when it happened, our feelings become jumbled and dark. Let each of them put a drop or two of food coloring into the clear water of a large glass jar, symbolizing their grief. As the water gets dark, the facilitator continues to talk about how important it is to have safe people and a safe place to share their feelings with – much like a clean swimming pool to swim in. When the children agree the water is dark and would be scary to swim in, pour a cup of bleach into the water and stir, showing how even when it seems like everything is dark and scary, having a safe place to talk and share can make it okay again. The lesson: we will never be the same as the water started out, but there is help and love for us to clear up our feelings just as we did with the water. **Make sure you do this activity in a room without carpeting, and that you keep control of the food coloring – it stains clothing!**

2. Thoughts: Use a story book to start this activity, preferably one that talks about grief and features “talking bubbles” extending from a person’s mouth with the words they are saying written inside the bubble. Show the children how the bubbles symbolize what the person is saying. Now tell them you want to do an activity with bubbles, but you need it to be very quiet. Pull out a bottle of soap bubbles and gently blow a large one. Ask them to think of a word or phrase about the person who died. They can raise their hands to share what they are thinking so the activity doesn’t escalate out of control. Once everyone has had a chance to “fill in the bubble,” then you can blow lots of bubbles and tell the kids that these many bubbles represent things people say that can hurt us. Let them stomp on or swat at these bubbles and be prepared for pandemonium! **The first part of this activity can be done with bubble gum, as long as participants keep it in their mouths.**

3. Tower of Life: Using a set of building blocks or Styrofoam blocks, have the group construct a tower together and remind them that all towers need a strong foundation to support the weight on top. Once they have the tower in place, tell them that each living person also represents a tower, and that the foundation stones will determine how tall and strong the tower can be. Have them share positive character traits that the person who died had that were part of the foundation for that person’s life, i.e., courage, kindness, compassion, love, etc. Talk about how each participant can work to develop one of those traits as part of the foundation for their own lives, and how that trait can become a legacy to honor the person who died. If time allows, let them decorate a Styrofoam block with paint, markers, etc., labeled with the trait they most want to emulate in the person who died.

4. Where Is Your Voice? Using a variety of puppets, ask each group member to choose one that represents them. Each person then has the chance to tell why they chose that puppet, and allow it to say some things about the person who died that might be hard to say if they were not a puppet. Explain that often it’s easier to be silent when you think other people will judge you, but if you could become another character it might be easier to share your pain or thoughts, knowing that people wouldn’t make fun of you. **Another variation of this activity is often done using masks, illustrating that sometimes it’s easier to pretend that things are fine on the outside when you are hurting and things are painful on the inside.** Have participants decorate a happy mask that represents the “face” they show others to protect themselves.

5. Phone Book Frustration: Start the activity by explaining that there are many different emotions associated with grief, and sometimes those feelings escalate to the point that we need to use up some of the physical energy they generate in a way that is not harmful to ourselves or others. Pull out a stack

of phone books and give one to each participant. Tell them its okay to take out their frustration on the book itself in any way that doesn't damage other people or property. They can fold, shred, stomp on, tear or wad the pages as a way to release pent-up frustration. Once they've finished, ask them to sit in a circle and describe their feelings about what just happened. **You can do the same type of activity with bubble wrap; ask them to identify what the individual bubbles they popped or stomped on represented.**

6. The Grief Path: Cut a length of butcher paper for each participant, representing the path they will take on their journey through grief. Let the shape the path with scissors if they wish. Ask them to draw stones to fill in the path on their paper, and then write the name of each emotion they have experienced or think they will encounter as they move through the grieving process. Some of the stones may stay blank, because there may be emotions they don't know they will experience. Ask them to decorate the stones any way they wish (paint, markers, glitter, etc.) and if time allows, provide a real stone that they can write the emotion they are most struggling with right now. Let them decorate it and encourage them to place it somewhere in their yard or garden at home.

7. Now and Then: Each participant gets a piece of paper and access to a variety of crayons or colored markers. Have them draw a line down the center of the paper from top to bottom, and write the word "Now" at the top of one column, and "Then" at the top of the other column. Using colors to indicate moods, have the list the details of their daily routine before the person died under the "then" column, what their daily routine is like today under the "now" column. Then ask them to identify what has changed and how the death affects their personal routine and the activities they do or don't do. Allow them to share how they feel about the changes if they want to do so.

8. Letter to the Loved One: Provide writing materials and ask each person to write a letter to the person who died, telling them anything they want them to know. Suggestions to get them going might be: an activity they enjoyed with their person; what the funeral was like for them; what questions they have for their person; something(s) they wish they had been able to tell their person but didn't; character traits they admire in their person; what life is like each day now that their person is dead. Invite anyone who would like to share their letter with the group to do so. Provide envelopes so participants can take their letters with them and keep them private; tell them they can do whatever they wish with the letter.

9. Find Your Feelings: Create a word search (or ask Kathie or Carrie to send you an email with a copy of one) that has the following feelings somewhere in the scramble: afraid, angry, alone, abandoned, confused, depressed, glad, guilty, hopeless, hopeful, mad, relieved, sad, scared, sorry, unhappy, upset. Have participants find the words and discuss which ones they have had the most trouble with. Explain that sometimes parents or adults don't know what they are feeling and often have to try to "search" for their emotions and how best to help them. Then allow them to create their own word search that incorporates words that express what would help them. Examples include: hug, laugh, cry, tears, quiet, walk, bike, etc. Invite them to share their word search with parents if they wish.

10. Sprouting a Sunflower Seed: Provide paper cups, sunflower seeds and potting soil. Review the story of the sunflower (available from Kathie or Carrie) with the group, then talk with them about what they hope their lives will be like once they have planted their seed in faith, watered it with tears, fertilized it by listening to the stories of others and watching a new part of who they are grow from going through the journey of grief. Ask them to care for the seed at home and watch as it grows. When

large enough, they can transplant to the yard as a reminder of how they are growing and learning that they are strong and can do hard things.