

Newsletter

Navigating Children's Grief

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How Grief Affects Thinking and Learning

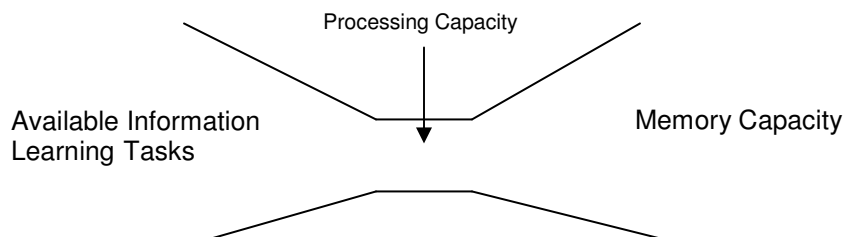
When someone very important to our lives dies, several changes take place that affect memory, concentration and learning. This challenge lasts for months and can last for two or more years.

Our most basic instinct is to survive! When a child loses a parent whose job is to keep the child safe and provide for basic needs, feelings of real fear can result. Children worry about the surviving parent and often wonder what will happen to them if this parent dies, too. The surviving parent may be grieving, and perhaps unable to focus on the needs of the child for a time.

Learning Theory and Grief

Children have many learning responsibilities. Grief and trauma can be a detriment to learning. Here is how learning theory applies to grieving children.

There is a potentially infinite amount of information in the universe. The brain appears to have, if not unlimited, at least a massive storage capacity. The limitation is in the amount of information that can be processed at one time. Learning theory suggest that only 5-6 chunks of information can be processed at one time. This diagram may help:



When the narrow portion, processing ability, is filled with thoughts of the deceased and the necessity of managing intense emotions, little room is left for concentrating on academic demands and other memory tasks. The stress of daily academic tasks are often overwhelming to a child.

High Achievers

There are children who continue to perform well in school following the death of a significant loved one. These children often go unnoticed. They may use the tasks of schoolwork or sports to block out painful feelings and thoughts, or they may feel a need to excel because of a feeling that the parent is watching them and want to show the deceased parent how much they care in this way. This type of response to loss can result in stress-related health problems later in life, as well as potential physical and emotional difficulties from unresolved grief.

How to Help

- Maintain routines in school
- Be realistic about expectations for academic achievement
- Allow make-up opportunities
- Remember that some children continue to have academic difficulties up to 2 years following a death, and sometimes beyond
- Make exceptions for sports participation...sports can help with the healing process
- Refer to the school counselor
- Communicate with the parents
- Respect the child's need to grieve
- Avoid telling the child to "Move on" or "Get over it".
- Create an emotionally safe classroom
- Learn about children's grief (CGEA's online course is a great resource: www.childgrief.org)
- Recognize that intense grief can come at developmental stages, years after a death occurs
- Be patient
- Affirm the person, regardless of academic performance
- Give the parent and child this website address for additional support