

WHAT TO DO WHEN DEATH ENTERS THE LIFE OF A CHILD

HELPING THE CHILD DEVELOP PERSONAL RITUALS OF HEALING

Rituals are an important part of human existence, regardless of age and/or life's experience. Children have many rituals in their lives, and it is appropriate and helpful to give them specific rituals designed to help them through their grief. These need not be terribly elaborate.

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One father had a small bell engraved with the name and dates of birth and death of a newborn. The bell is rung by every member of the family when they are feeling sad. He told the family that every time the bell rings, the baby laughs in heaven.

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A small clay pot is broken by the children and on each piece is written a problem associated with the death and grieving. This may be things such as fighting with siblings, poor grades in school, not wanting to do chores, etc. As each problem is resolved, that piece of the pot is glued back into place. Eventually the pot is displayed prominently in the home as a visual reminder of how the family worked together to resolve the problems and their grief.

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The child can "write" a letter to the deceased. Even the very young can draw a picture to express how they feel about the person who has died. These can then be placed in the casket or kept at home in a special memorial book.

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A memorial book can be created for the children to use. In this they can put pictures, drawings, letters, even small physical items such as a favorite sock or scarf. Stories can then be told about each item to bring back the happy memories of that person.

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One four-year-old child who was grieving the loss of his older sister took her picture out of the album and told his mother to put it on the top of the Christmas tree. He said that his sister could be the Christmas angel. The family agreed to this and created a new tradition in the home.

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During special occasions, have a certain reminder of the deceased present. This may be a plate on which has been engraved the name, dates of birth and death of the deceased which is used to hold bread or cookies, or some particular holiday/anniversary treat. It can be a candle that is lighted only on special occasions. Some families set an extra place at the dinner table in memory of the deceased.

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If hanging stockings at Christmas is a tradition, have one up with the name of the deceased on it. During the preparation weeks, each child and adult in the family can write or draw something for the deceased and put it in the stocking. When gifts are distributed, take the time to pull one item from the stocking, give it to the person who put it in the stocking and have them read it or tell the story of why it was contributed. This should be done slowly, with each family member given as much time as they need to explain their gift.

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The deceased can become a prayer object for the child. This does not interfere with the child's religious upbringing if the family believes in the eternal life of the spirit. There is something wonderfully comforting about being able to "talk to" someone who has died; to be able to express the joys and pains of living. A child will do this naturally and should be encouraged to continue.

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Plant a tree, rosebush, or other living thing in memory of the deceased. If this is done, it is critical that the adults tend the plant carefully to prevent it from becoming another loss for the child. If a pet has died and is buried in the backyard, plant the tree over the grave. Some cemeteries will allow the planting of a tree or bush at the grave-side and the grounds-keeping staff will tend it.