

61 - How to Give Young Children the Gift of Good Grief

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Purpose: The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. URL at www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast for notifications about future episodes. Today, we are so very honored to have with us Michele Benyo. Michele is a certified grief recovery specialist, an early childhood educator and parent coach, and the founder of "Good Grief Parenting". After her six-year-old son died of cancer, her three-year-old daughter said, Mommy, half of me is gone. This heartbreaking statement defined Michele's life purpose. Her mission is twofold, to help parents through an unimaginable challenge of parenting, while grieving the death of a child, and to help parents meet the unique needs of a child who has lost a sibling in the early childhood years. The desire of Michele's heart is to see families live forward after loss towards a future bright with possibilities and even joy. Michele, we are so honored to have you here as our guest today.

Michele Benyo: Thank you so much. I'm really happy to be here.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Michele, it really is an honor to have you here. And I'm so glad that we get to chat for a little bit because grief is something that every single one of us has gone through, is going through, or we know we will go through it at some point, right? So yes, your title, How to Give Young Children the Gift of Good Grief, is one that truly tugs at my heartstrings, and something that families, teachers, administrators, and anyone working with people needs to understand. So, explain to us your title.

Michele Benyo: Yes, thank you for asking that, you know, we don't like grief, it's something we try to avoid. Our society is so good at just really trying to gloss over grief, and not allow that pain. And grief, really, what we need to understand about grief is, that it really is the way that we heal. It's by going straight through grief and allowing it to do what it's meant to do, that we heal. And so, we really need to bring that to how we help children with grief, because that's where all of us learn how to cope with grief or not cope with grief in particularly healthy ways. So, grief is good. And that's what I want to help adults understand.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: In our classrooms, we have so many children that indeed are grieving. But I think it looks different for everyone, and especially in our children. And you know, we do want to protect them. And very often, we don't necessarily address it. But how can we specifically address it? And how can we help them understand what they're going through and understand grief?

Michele Benyo: Yes, again, thanks for asking that. Because this is where well-meaning adults just kind of can get off on the wrong track at the outset. And that is because children really don't grieve the way that we do. And we often don't see their grief. And the mistake that we make as adults is if we don't see them grieving, then they're doing okay, and we don't want to upset them, by bringing up the loss or the thing that's causing the grief. And in actuality, we can know no matter what a child looks like, no matter how they appear, we can know that if they've experienced loss, in their little lives, they are feeling it deep in the depths. And they need our help as adults, to help them understand these really big, conflicting, multifaceted feelings, that they feel when they experience loss, which is all grief is. It's our reaction to loss. And sometimes kids will behave in ways where we as adults aren't sure whether that's just age-appropriate, or typical behavior or even misbehavior, or we see them playing because that's how children process grief. And so, as they do so many other things in their lives, is through play. And so, we need to recognize that. And we need to be willing to have

conversations because that's what children need. They need for us to validate their reality, whether they're talking to us about it or sharing it with us directly or not.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: So, Michele, just a quick question. Are the stages of grief the same for adults and children?

Michele Benyo: You know, I do not subscribe to the stages of grief, personally. The thing about grief is that every single person experiences it in their own way. And it's not one bit linear. I really wasn't familiar with grief before I experienced the loss of my son. And I, in my early days, was so concerned that I was doing grief wrong, because I heard about these stages of grief, and they were not what I was doing. And so, from my own personal experience, I've really seen that many people get confused when they think they need to go through this process. Grief is definitely a process, but it is as varied as the people who are grieving. And all of those characteristics that are found in those stages of grief, are really not things everyone experiences. In fact, many people don't realize that Elizabeth Keebler-Ross, from whom those stages are derived, identified stages, those stages for people who they themselves were facing death, and had gotten a terminal diagnosis. So, it's not really the same thing. So yes, so children, I think they experience all the same feelings, and aspects of grief that adults do. To answer, I think, what your real question was, but does it go through stages? That's not really something that I follow.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Okay. Now, I'm so glad that you shared that, because I wasn't aware that that's where those stages came from. So that's cool to know. So, thank you so much.

Michele Benyo: Yeah.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: So, I'm wondering, first of all, dang cancer, that's just, you know, you must have gone through, like you said, just a process, and you're trying to work on it yourself. And then you're also having to help, you know, a little one go through that. Were there any red flags or anything that really kind of brought you, you know, to the forefront of seeing that there is a problem with my young one, I need to address it, and maybe some red flags, that teachers and educators can look for in the classroom?

Michele Benyo: What I would say, well, first of all, I was an early childhood parent educator before my son ever got sick. So, this was my field. So, when I experienced this personally, I was looking at my family through that lens of really being focused on the child. And the very first night that my son was in the hospital, after he'd been diagnosed, and his dad was there with him. I was home with my then 15-month-old daughter. 15 months. And she wandered around the house making this inhuman wailing sound and throwing herself on the floor and refusing to be consoled by me. So that was my first clue that this journey we were on was as deep for her as it was for the rest of us. And then two and a half years later, when my son died, and she was three and a half, she actually said to me, "Mommy, half of me is gone". And I knew because I know what these first five early formative years are for every child and their identity formation, that that was a true statement. And so, it just kind of made me sit up and take notice, as if I wasn't already looking at her through that lens. It was like, half of her is gone. She's three and a half, and she has her whole life ahead of her. And had she not said that to me, just to go back to what I said a few minutes ago, had she not said that statement to me, as I watched her go through her days, I mean, we talked, we were open about what we were going through as a family, but I wouldn't have seen in her behavior, the fact that she felt half of her was gone. So, when you talk about red flags, I would just say, always know that a child is experiencing grief if they've had a loss. And then what I talk with educators about a lot, is the teachable moments that you can just build into your time with children. I have four keys that I offer parents. And the first one is self-care, to make sure you're taking care of yourself, because you can't take care of your child well, if you're not taking care of yourself well. So yes, it's good you're looking at your child, but don't do that to the neglect of your own needs. But then the second piece is not protecting them, but going through it with them and initiating conversations where you invite the child to say how they're feeling and tell them, I'm feeling this way. When do you miss your brother the most? How are you feeling today? You look like you're really sad. Do you want to talk to me about it? Just these ways of acknowledging what they're going through. And that's what educators and parents can both do. The third key that I offer is just the essential messages. Again, any adult who cares about young children knows that we need to reinforce the value of who they are. We need to reinforce the reality and the validity of their emotions when they're angry, not just discipline them or teach them a different way to handle their emotions, but say, boy, I can really understand why you're angry about this. Or do you want to tell me how you're feeling right now? And let the child know you can get through this. We can get through this. So, the essential messages that we give kids to help them build resilience is another key for any adult working with a child, acknowledging their grief and then saying, and we're going to get through this. You can handle this.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Michele, I love this because I was going to ask you about how to question, and things like that. But we had chatted a little bit and you had said something about good grief, and the good grief parenting approach. I want to make sure we touch on that a little bit because I think that's important.

Michele Benyo: Yes, it is very important. And my focus really is on parenting. There are plenty of supports out there for families at the time of loss. And those are wonderful supports. But as I say, my daughter at three and a half, it's like we got done with our six week grief support group at the hospital. And then what? And I did not find any resources to help me parent her. And I was a quote, unquote, expert in this. And I didn't know how to do it. So good grief parenting is that approach recognizing that for the rest of her life, especially with a sibling loss, which is another topic all on its own, and the area I focus in, she's going to live. She's going to live her life forward in the presence of grief. And so, parenting is going to be different. That the two hardest things we do as adults is parent and cope with grief. And when you're trying to do both of those at the same time, with a young child that you're trying to give the best possible future to, that's really a tough challenge. So, we start by recognizing that grief is good. It's not something to avoid. And the four heartbeats, I call them, of the good grief parenting approach start with the recognition that grief, we kind of misunderstand grief. So, we need to understand good grief beliefs, that are the truth about grief and how it can really be good. Then inviting conversation and continuing the relationship with the loved one who's lost, is the second step. The third heartbeat is those essential messages I talked about. And then the fourth heartbeat is all of the intentional choices and decisions we make as a parent, to keep thoughtful, caring parenting first and foremost in our upbringing of this child, recognizing that they're going to grow up differently than their peers, because grief makes everything in their relationships with other peers different. And we need to acknowledge that. So, sort of in a nutshell, that's what I help parents with in good grief parenting.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Michele, that's so much to think about, but it's so relevant. And to be honest with you, it's something that is uncomfortable, just like you said, but it is so crucial for growth, growth for kids, growth for ourselves. So, as we wind down today's conversation, do you have three takeaways that you can leave our listeners with?

Michele Benyo: Yes, I really do. The first one is that idea that grief is good, that we face it, that we go straight through it. And as painful as it is, that really is the best way for us to heal is just to allow the pain and go through it, and acknowledge it. Self-care is so important. And this is most important for parents because they're probably experiencing the loss too, but certainly important for other caregivers as well. Be sure that you're able to handle your own grief because you are always the way we as adults cope with grief and talk about it and process it. We are being role models for children. And frankly, most of us had adult role models who didn't really teach us how to grieve very well. And that's why there's a need for me, frankly, you know. And then the third thing is that children really do need for adults to be honest with them, to have those tough conversations, even to be willing to say the words dead and died, because those are the words that have the actual meaning of what happened. And children really need for us to be willing to talk with them and hear and listen to and agree with their feelings. So those would be my three takeaways.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: And those are outstanding. What is one challenge that you can leave our listeners with?

Michele Benyo: The challenge, I think, is to be open and honest about loss and grief with children, because we didn't learn how to do that. And because, you know, I can tell you to talk to a child, but then you say, OK, how do I do it? So, I'll actually offer everyone listening a resource that I have on my website. My website is [GoodGriefParenting.com](https://www.GoodGriefParenting.com). And right at the top, you can download my Good Grief Guide, which talks a lot. It talks about many of these things I've mentioned. What are some of the ideas we have about grief that we can reframe to make it easier to help kids with it? And then even some guidance on how to actually talk to kids and have those conversations, ways that we're inclined to talk to them now, and then maybe better ways to frame some of those conversations. So please, I just really encourage everyone to go download this and have it as a resource. The Good Grief Guide at [GoodGriefParenting.com](https://www.GoodGriefParenting.com).

Dr. Tisha Shipley: Thank you so much. We appreciate you being here. We hope that we can work together in the future. And Michele, thank you for your time.

Michele Benyo: Thank you so much. I appreciated the opportunity to talk with you and your audience. Thank you.

Dr. Stephanie Heald: Thank you, Michele.