

62 - Essential Messages (Grieving) Children Need from Adults

Original Air Date: 12/7/22

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. www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast

Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. 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.

Host Dr. 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.

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Today, we have with us a very special speaker. Michele has been here before, and we're excited to hear from her again.

Michele Benyo is a lifelong educator and learner. She has a master's degree in family education and is a certified grief recovery specialist, an early childhood parent coach, a mentor, 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 focused Michele's career as an early childhood parenting specialist on the impact of grief on young children, particularly after child loss. Michele equips parents and other caring individuals to recognize a young child's grief, and to provide the support that children need to build resilience, and cope with any loss. The desire of Michele's heart is to see families thrive after loss and live forward towards a future bright with possibilities and even joy.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Michele, thank you so much for being with us today.

Michele Benyo Speaker: Thank you for being here. I always love being with you.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Yes, well, you're always amazing, and so that's why we keep inviting you back. And today, you're here to talk with us about a topic you've talked about before at our ACE conference this summer, which was amazing, and you had just resounding positive things coming from the audience. So, let's build just a little bit more.

So, first, let's go back over that we know everyone goes through grief and that there's different types of grief, and most of our listeners teach children, or they have children of their own. So, tell us a little bit about how children grieve.

Michele Benyo Speaker: You know, children are just watching us to get their cues from us.

They're just feeling all of these feelings, and when they experience grief, it's not familiar to them. So, it's going to come out in the ways that children express just about everything. It's going to come out as behaviors.

It's going to come out as emotion, or they're going to work it through in play. And so, adults are often sort of misled, because they see kids acting like kids act, and there's really no marker that tells an adult that what the child is doing is grief. Unlike us as adults, when we grieve, it's clear that we're feeling grief, that we're feeling a feeling that we don't have every day.

And so, children are going to grieve by, you know, you might notice behavior a little different than what they typically do. They might be more aggressive. They might be quieter.

There might be some physical manifestations, be able to sleep well or may not want to eat or may have tummy aches, things that are kind of unexplainable. And so those are the things that we need to watch for. The most important thing, though, is that they may be just playing.

And that's where a lot of adults will say they seem to be doing fine. They're just playing. But we know that children are working.

They work all of these things in their lives through in their play. And so, they do that with grief as well.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: And that's great for us to know because we know children learn through play.

So, we also just learned that they grieve while they're also playing. So, you touched on the adult part just a little bit. But is there a huge difference between how children grieve and how adults grieve? I know adults probably aren't out playing.

But is there anything different that you want our listeners to know, just to make sure that they know as an adult, it's okay to grieve too?

Michele Benyo Speaker: I think the difference is that I would say, really, children grieve just as adults do. And I think that's important for adults to realize, because it can be very deep grief. And the thing that I think we sometimes overlook as adults is that children may grieve about different things and what they feel, even though it may seem like a small thing to us.

What they feel is truly 100% grief. When I've spoken to you before, I shared this story about myself losing the blow-up toy when I was a child and having to watch it float and float off to the horizon. And what I felt was very much grief.

That was the first grief experience I remember. And adults may respond to that as it's not a big deal. That's just a toy.

And so, I think one thing to know about how children's grief is different, is that it can be honestly deep grief, about something that we may not grieve when we're adults. And so, their grief may be about something that we see as being smaller. And we still need to honor it and recognize that they have the same feelings we have when we grieve about something.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: That was perfectly said. Okay, so what are a few tips on helping children when they're going through grief for parents and teachers?

Michele Benyo Speaker: This is the number one tip, and that is to validate it, to acknowledge it, to know that our job as adults is not to try to make them feel better, because we can't. We can't just cheer kids out of grief just any more than we can cheer an adult out of grief.

And so, the main tips are when you identify that perhaps this child is grieving, you know, they may be playing, but you know something, some big loss has happened in their life. Don't make the mistake that we so often do, of trying to protect them. Instead, you know, ask them how they're doing.

I know this happened. How do you feel about that? And opening up opportunities for conversation. This is sort of the opposite of what we think we should do as adults.

But really, the biggest tip for helping kids when they're grieving is to agree with their grief. Oh, I know that hurts so much. You must really miss this or this person, and then to invite kids to share their feelings about it and talk to you about it.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Michele, I love how you gave us some tips, but you also gave us some ways that we might get it wrong with our children. So, when we're really trying to help young children cope with the loss in grief, what are some essential messages that we want to make sure as adults we're communicating to children?

Michele Benyo Speaker: Yes, and that's really the whole key. And that's why I wanted to talk to you about that today, because this is important for all kids.

This is not just for kids who are grieving. We know that when we're disciplining kids and teaching kids how to behave well and how to manage emotions, that can be kind of top of mind. And we need to remember that going on under that, are their feelings about what they're experiencing.

And Betty Davies, who wrote the book **Shadows in the Sun** about early childhood loss, particularly sibling loss, which is my field of expertise, identified four messages or four things that children feel when they're in a situation, and they're responding to adults around them. And they are, I don't understand what's happening. I don't belong here.

I hurt inside, and I'm not enough. Because they may see that the grief, is so important to the adult, they can feel they're not enough. So how can we counter that as adults? We need to really be conscious of giving them other messages, such as letting them know what's happening.

We need to share information with them on an age-appropriate way and say, I know this must be confusing to you. But messages like, we will get through this. I know you can handle this, and I'm going to help you.

We're going, we don't feel good now, but we will feel better. We will get through this. Letting the child know that they are valued, especially in the loss of a sibling, for example.

We're so sorry your brother died, but we're so glad that you're still here. When they're misbehaving, when they're doing behaviors that are difficult for us, rather than disciplining, they need the message that it makes sense that they feel this way. When my son was in the hospital, and he was experiencing his cancer, and he was being angry, we would really had to acknowledge that there was a reason for his anger.

Oh, I know you're angry about this. Or in the case of other losses, I know you feel hurt, and you, they're feeling like they are powerless. We maybe don't use that word with them because they don't really know what that means.

But acknowledge those big emotions and say, it makes sense that you feel this way. I'm going to help you with this. Those are the kinds of messages they need to get from us, just understanding and caring.

They need to know that they're still connected with the family, that they're still secure, and that they are capable, and that they are valued.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, Michele, are there any other ways besides through words, that we can communicate essential messages to young children?

Michele Benyo Speaker: Yes. One of the things we tend to do with kids is leave them out of activities that are going on, leave them out of conversations, and just allowing them to be there, giving them hugs.

Sometimes when something big is happening in a family, and we're trying to shield kids from it, we try to keep them away from the conversation instead of allowing them to hear it. And we can let them be there and just give them hugs. We can spend time with them and say, I know this is a difficult time.

Is there something you'd like to do with me that might help you feel better? And then spend that time with them. Also teaching them ways to handle their own grief. We do this with other big emotions.

If kids are feeling out of sorts, to allow them to go do something that will make them feel better in their room or wherever, and know that they don't have to be here if this is a tough place for them. It's okay for them to take care of their tough feelings, by going and being away from the group, doing something that's going to make them feel better, something that they enjoy. Just demonstrating understanding of their feelings, and then enabling them to do things and us help them with our caring and our closeness, to do things that help them feel connected and feel better.

Does that answer your question?

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Yes, ma'am. Thank you so much.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Michele, you have just given us so much to so many tools and strategies, when we are in that moment and we are wanting to support a child who is grieving, but we might not know how.

I love the fact that you diversified, and you gave us some ways using words and language, but you also gave us some non-verbal ways and I think that's so important. Sometimes a hug truly can just be that connection that they need in that moment. We always wind our podcast down with three takeaways for listeners.

Can you just give us three takeaways that you want to leave our listeners with?

Michele Benyo Speaker: Well, I want to add one in light of what you just said and that is as adults, we feel like we have to do the right thing, the perfect thing. And you know what with kids when they're grieving is because we don't feel equipped. We don't feel experienced.

We don't know what to do. So, in answer to what you just said, I really want your listeners to recognize that that hug is important, that I'm not sure what to do. So, you just say to the person, I'm sorry, you're feeling this way.

You don't have to have a lot of words or a lot of answers for them. Just be present and don't be concerned about what you say. The takeaways that I wanted to specifically say, are that childhood is the best time to learn about loss and grief and to get those coping skills.

And sometimes the coping skills are just acknowledging that, yes, this grief makes sense and it's okay to feel it. And I don't have to have a perfect way to handle it. I just need to allow myself to feel it.

That's where that coping begins. And then and for kids to learn this in early childhood, really equips them to grow up to be adults who can help other grievers through grief. And this is so important in our society, where we don't know how to do this very well.

The other takeaway is that even if kids appear to be okay when they've been exposed to loss and grief, you can know whether they're really showing it to you or not, that they're experiencing it. They have feelings they don't understand. That might be confusion, fear, insecurity, loneliness.

And they need messages of understanding and reassurance from adults.

And the third takeaway is that, when children learn that they're loved and valued and cared for and capable of handling this, they can thrive after loss. And that's really what we want for our children.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: That's awesome, Michele. We want to leave our listeners with one challenge. What do you challenge them with today?

Michele Benyo Speaker: I challenge them to just remember what they've heard today and then to be intentional about communicating to children that they're capable, in the midst of loss rather than shielding them, which comes so naturally to us.

Confront it with them, acknowledge it with them, validate it with them, and then say, give them messages that say, here are ways we can handle it. You can handle it. And I know you're capable of this.

And I'm going to help you. So just really be intentional about giving them those messages.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you, Michelle.

Everything you share with us is always spot on. And I know our listeners are going to take all of this information, and use it with their children and in their classrooms. So, thank you so much for being with us today.

We appreciate it.

Michele Benyo Speaker: Thank you. I loved being here.