

Helping a Child Heal Through Grief: Part 1

by Barbara Trimble



In the fall of 1964, I was seven years old when my three-day-old brother died from a heart defect. I don't remember much about my mother's pregnancy, but I will always remember the morning my oldest sister told me that he had died. I remember feeling stunned and wanted to seek out my mother but she was still in the hospital due to surgery immediately following birth. I wanted to see my Daddy but I was told I couldn't go downstairs because he was crying. After five girls, Daddy had finally gotten a son only to lose him again.

We did not go to school the day of the viewing. It was in the evening and as I walked into the parlor, I saw this tiny casket about the size of an old fashioned workman's lunchbox poised on a stand in the middle of the aisle. Butch (at three days old he already had a nickname) had the most beautiful red hair and chubbiest little cheeks I'd ever seen. He was dressed in the same blue shorts outfit that he was supposed to have come home from the hospital in. I felt an overpowering need to touch my baby brother, I guess to make it real for me--to prove it was not a baby doll in that box. I stroked his feathery hair and touched his clenched, baby-sized hands before being ushered to one side so that other mourners could pay their respects to my father. (This was in 1964 when the grieving parents were the primary focus of the support system.)

My sisters and I were not allowed to go to the funeral the next morning, but we were allowed to go to school. I remember walking up to my second grade teacher, Mrs. Timmons, and handing her a note from my father stating the reason why I had been absent from school. I remember bursting into uncontrollable sobs saying, "My little brother died." What was Mrs. Timmons' response? Not what you might expect a teacher to say nowadays. She folded the note and set it aside and said, "Go wash your face and have a seat." My grief--my pain had been dismissed, and it was to be business as usual in a day of the life of a second grade girl. Perhaps Mrs. Timmons did not know how to respond to a child's grief reactions and that is okay, but it would have been so meaningful if she had validated my loss with a simple, "I'm sorry."

Feeling alone, I dealt with my grief the best way I knew how--I kept it bottled up inside of me until this year when I began a course in Grief Counseling and learned how to finally complete my grief work. There were five of us kids back then and not once did anyone ever stop to ask us how we felt or how we were doing. After all, we were just kids...

So, are children capable of experiencing grief? Yes. At what age do they become able to differentiate feelings associated with the grief process? How do grief reactions affect other aspects of a child's life and eventually into adulthood? As adults, what can we do personally and professionally help a child work through and heal from their grief? Each child's experience is unique but I will begin to try to answer these questions next month in Helping a Child Heal from Grief: Part 2.