

MINISTERING TO CHILDREN WHO ARE MOURNING

1. **Be present.** In the book of Job, a book that is quite a picture of dealing with suffering, Job's friends do a lot of things really, really wrong. But Job 2:13 shares something they did right, "And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great." When anyone, especially a child, is grieving we have the desire to "do" and to "fix". Kids need people who are there. Be consistent when right now their world is void of consistency. Even if you do nothing but sit close by for them to run up and hug, be that.

2. **Be honest.** Kids will have lots of questions. And they will likely ask questions that no one else wants to and questions that don't have easy answers. Answer as honestly as possible. Of course, keep age appropriateness in mind, but lying or padding the truth will only cause more harm in the future.

3. **Repeat the truth.** Tell the child repeatedly the things that we know for sure from Scripture. God loves them. God is with them. When believers die, they are immediately with Jesus. Heaven is a good place. God is good, even when we are hurting. Avoid platitudes that aren't scriptural. Also, be wise in how you share truth. Speak truth to comfort, not to confuse. Saying "this was God's will" to a young child sounds helpful, but is just too much for them to process.

3. **It's ok to say "I don't know".** Why did God let my mama die? Why is this happening to my family? How long will it hurt? Those are questions that we just can not know the answer to. "I don't know" is an acceptable answer. Say "I don't know" and repeat the truth that we do know.

4. **Avoid sayings that don't make any sense.** Kids don't always understand "passed away" or "gone to sleep" or "gone away". Use simple, clear language. "John, I'm so sorry that your grandma died. I know that makes you feel sad."

5. **Understand that kids grieve differently than grown-ups.** A child may very likely cry briefly and then run off to play. This can be disconcerting to adults, but young minds just can't process grief in large portions. They will be sad again and they will think about it a whole lot more than you realize. However, God protects their little brains by letting them grieve in pockets.

6. **Listen.** Be available for the child to talk if he or she wants to. Don't force conversation, but it is ok to ask things like, "What did you love about your mom?" or "Tell me a favorite memory about your grandma." Talking is extremely healthy, but kids will shut down if they feel like you are forcing them.

7. **Watch for disturbing behavior.** There are warning signs that may show that a child isn't processing grief well. Violence, anger, extreme withdrawal, not eating, depression and self-injury are all signs of extreme grief that may need further attention.

8. **Encourage counseling.** I highly recommend counseling for every child that experiences a loss. They may only need one session or they may need lots of help, but I am a big fan of having someone else walk alongside such a critical time in a child's life. Counseling is not a sign that the family can't help a child. It is a sign of great love and dedication to that child.

9. **Pray.** You can do all of these things and still feel helpless in truly helping a child who is grieving. The truth is, it is a process that only God can bring them through. It is part of His plan and something that He wants to use powerfully in the child's life. So, pray. A lot. Pray for God to heal and bind up the broken-hearted. Pray for protection spiritually and emotionally. Pray for God to work a miracle in healing that child.