

Bereaved adolescents and the transition to adulthood

The various challenges that may arise throughout the journey of transitioning to adulthood are often intensified for bereaved adolescents. Adolescence is a time of change, particularly in the realms of physical, psychological and social domains. These changes can create some real discomfort for adolescents in general, and without the support of a parent, navigating this time can be challenging.



DEVELOP STRUCTURE AND COPING SKILLS

Many adolescents transitioning to adulthood are led through scaffolded rites of passage. The transition period for bereaved adolescents may lack guidance and stability, and it is important that they develop routine and structure to cope with the changes. Adolescents express and process grief in a variety of ways depending on factors such as; the context of bereavement, support systems, age and personality.

In addition, some bereaved adolescents may be more reliant or dependent on their remaining parent, whilst others may have taken on responsibilities by assuming the empty roles of their parents. Either situation will lead to a more difficult transition, and as a parent, it is important that you develop structure to enable both independence and stability for your adolescent. It is also crucial that they have developed skills in coping with their grief prior to major changes in their lives.

NEGOTIATION AND SUPPORT

Establishing clear boundaries together as your adolescent transitions to adulthood would be greatly beneficial. Boundaries can help to foster trust

and respect, and they are best established through active listening, open communication, and negotiation. The process of establishing boundaries together will develop independence and informed decision-making, ensuring your adolescent feels safe and supported. Keep in mind that it is important to also consider how and when boundaries change or evolve.

Adolescents are likely to be open and collaborative in setting boundaries if the conversation feels like a respectful negotiation. During a time of experimenting, testing out boundaries, peer pressure and impulsivity, adolescents can sometimes make mistakes or engage in unsafe behaviour, although it often serves as valuable learning experiences. Through negotiation and support, you can help guide your adolescent in navigating a time of great change.

SUPPORT SYSTEM

Adolescents that are bereaved by a significant loss may feel the overwhelming loss of someone who helped shape their fragile self-identity. It is important to ensure that they have adequate support such as; a counsellor, a trusted adult, a teacher or a close family member.

Often adolescents will move away from their existing support network, resulting in changes to their friends and being geographically distant to their family. This may be particularly challenging as they may be surrounded by different people and they may find it hard to ask for and accept help. It is important that adolescents maintain the support of caring, open, honest and loving adults over the period of transitioning to adulthood.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Maintaining an open line of communication is crucial, especially at a time where change is occurring. Adolescents often feel the need to have others think that everything is under control at all times, leading to them not being comfortable expressing strong emotions and feelings. Bottling up their feelings can be detrimental, with a higher likelihood of them





developing depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

Whilst you may not always agree with their life choices, as their independence grows, it is important that you share your wisdom and insight without being critical. Maintaining an open line of communication will ensure that your adolescent feels safe and supported throughout their journey.

OFFER EMPATHY AND COMPASSION

It is undeniable that the young adult years are a time of growth, change, and challenge. Navigating this period whilst coping with a major loss can have a profound effect on a young person's social functioning, physical and mental health, and development. It is crucial that adolescents feel supported, understood and cared for as they embark on this journey of transitioning to adulthood.

Building a bond of understanding, compassion and empathy will ensure that your adolescent feels unconditionally supported and loved whilst they are seeking mastery over their environment and a sense of belonging, and gaining control and independence.

MILESTONES

Adolescents may re-experience the intensity of their loss during certain milestones that will occur throughout the transition to adulthood. Graduating High School, starting University and experiencing romantic relationships are some milestones that may trigger renewed grief with the absence of a parent that played an important role in their life. It is important for the surviving parent, caregiver or other family members to make an effort to be present witnesses to each major milestone throughout this period.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP. Visit our website for more grief resources and to learn about our free in person and virtual camps to help children and families learn healthy grieving skills.

Visit: www.feelthemagic.org.au

Call: 1300 602 465