

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Talking with Kids About Grief
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake. When a child experiences loss, whether it's the death of a parent, the death of a friend, or divorce, both the long and short-term consequences can be profound. On this edition of *About Health TV* we'll talk about how helping children who experience loss can make all the difference. We're joined by this discussion by Maria Trozzi, who is a psychologist from Boston Medical Center and also the director of the hospital's Good Grief program. And I must add also that she is the author of *Talking with Children About Loss*, which is a book we've discussed on *About Health TV* before. It's a really comprehensive book that can help any adult who is trying to help a child experience loss in a healthy way. Thank you, Maria, for coming.

MARIA: Glad to be here.

JEANNE BLAKE: I guess it's probably most helpful to talk about how the Good Grief program came to be and what it is.

MARIA: Well, we started looking at ways in which adults could really be helpful to children, and although our heart goes out to children, whether they're experiencing the illness or the death of a parent or a sibling, of a friend, or other losses such as divorce, we may not know how children are likely to understand whatever the loss is. And so our program actually started in the late 1980s as a training program. It has developed to a national training program where we work with school systems and certainly healthcare agencies. We work with pediatricians and school counselors and teachers, people that are likely to be in the lives of children, but might not know how a preschooler understands a violent death versus an early elementary child or a teenager. So really giving training as well as support is what we think is terribly important.

JEANNE BLAKE: Because, as I just said, the way that a child is helped through that process does make all the difference. I guess it helps determine in a large measure whether that child is able to be resilient from that experience.

MARIA: Well, resilience is what we all want from children, and I think of exercising the coping skill muscle as something that, if adults know how to foster that, then kids can actually have good outcomes from sometimes profound and devastating losses. So wanting to do the right thing is sometimes counterintuitive. As adults we want to protect children, and protecting them, I think, best is knowing what they need.

JEANNE BLAKE: I often don't do this, because I think it's important to give positive examples, but I think just to set the stage, I am sure that in your 20 years you've heard at least one story of a well-intentioned adult who tried to help a child and didn't quite do the right thing. Can you help us understand an example of that?

MARIA: Oh, sure. Actually, some of the big media people like Rosie O'Donnell and Oprah ... everyone knows about them, and they've become poster children for those adults in their adult life that have really become resilient but in fact were faced with devastating losses, where a parent thought he was doing the best thing by really kind of burying the memory of Mom and adultifying the oldest child and saying, "Your job is to take care of all your brothers and sisters," and it's too profoundly sad to feel about missing Mom so we simply will get rid of all the pictures. And you know that it comes from intentions of wanting to bury the pain and to allow kids to be kids, but in fact it does just the opposite.

JEANNE BLAKE: And an example of one ... actually, we'll look at one in a moment, but does any particular example come to mind of someone that you have encountered where you have said, "Good for you, that was just right"?

MARIA: Oh, absolutely. When there's a devastating loss and the adult in the family has to really focus on the children ... and it's always a struggle, whose needs come first, the spouse whose heart is broken but he has three children, and to really know that kids want to be heard, and if you don't listen to them they'll find ways to act out so that you do hear them. So when parents can understandably put their child first and really stabilize the home and create routine with love. Middle-class families have a much easier time doing it, because they have more social supports, and we see for families where poverty is also part of the landscape how hard that is to do, although they want to do it as well. And that's where social supports such as the community really has to come to play.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's a perfect segue for the story about Kemba, who is, I think, under any circumstances would have been a remarkable young woman and is today a remarkable young woman. But she's a part of a program called The Power of Girls Inside and Out, and we're just going to show

one segment of Kemba's story. Kemba was 13 years old when she learned that her mother had breast cancer, and her mother ultimately died from breast cancer. Here is just a short excerpt of her story.

[VIDEO CLIP]

NARRATOR: One person Kemba turned to for support was a woman she calls Aunt Gloria, a family friend from church.

KEMBA: Aunt Gloria talked to me about, you know, growing up, developing, and stuff, because she has a child ... she has two children, two girls, one of which is my best friend, and her niece is also my best friend, so she would just take us and talk to us about becoming a woman and stuff like that. So that was really helpful to talk to her, and I could call her anytime I'd want. You know, she'd be there on my doorstep.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: So, Maria, you can see that Kemba was very lucky in that, and she actually ends her story by talking about the fact that she could be successful in her life and she's in college and thriving because she had Aunt Gloria. But also she had a very close relationship with her dad, which grew even stronger. And so I think that they're a model for what can happen when there is a strong support.

MARIA: And for Kemba, being 13 without a mother couldn't be a more vulnerable time for her, and it's as though Dad just intuitively understood that she needed other women resources. But he ultimately is the foundation; he is the other parent, and it sounds as though he was available to be there for her.

JEANNE BLAKE: Help us understand at that developmental age ... I mean, it's such a critical time. A girl becoming a young woman and the kinds of long-lasting – as we described – the long-term consequences that a child suffers if that support isn't there. I mean, intuitively Gloria gave it to her, and her father knew that she would need that kind of support, but when a family doesn't understand that, what can the long-term consequences be?

MARIA: Well, I think to not have a mother model growing up during this very vulnerable time, getting through your adolescence can be much more bumpy. Dad may be incredibly distracted, especially with other children and needing to support the family. So a lot of times when adolescents go

off on their own and don't feel a real good tug home, I think that the consequences can be a variety of things, but certainly not feeling as though they have a real solid emotional base is there if they're trying to separate from us. And so I think the consequences certainly can be emotional, academic, and sometimes physiological. We certainly see young women who later in life experience depression and they realize that they just didn't have this foundation or this ability to have a range of emotions that were able to be expressed during this period of time. One of the things that we worry a lot about when a mother dies is that the oldest daughter becomes adultified, and that is taking on the role of mothering other children. In that way, it's another loss, because she loses her childhood, in this case, this wonderful, important time to be an adolescent, and she certainly had this loss without being able to have someone model. Although surrogates like Aunt Gloria, you cannot define their value. You know, kids need two things to have good outcomes, and one is one person, hopefully, that will know this young woman when she gets older, and so Aunt Gloria qualifies there, and then a safe place to express all the emotions that are part of this.

JEANNE BLAKE: When a child is going through the loss of a parent, it also is something that within this family was talked about. During the time that Kemba's mom was dying, it was something that was out in the open and it wasn't something that was being hidden from the children, which is also incredibly important.

MARIA: Absolutely. So often we see families ... I deal with families who understandably try to protect children from what I call that slippery slope down, when a parent is ill and then perhaps goes into remission and then there's an exacerbation of the cancer, and so there's this bumpy but downward slope. And when I'll say, "How do you think your youngster has understood this?" quite often the answer is, "We've tried to normalize things. We try to get to every soccer game. We try to keep her life on target." And although that's wonderful, at 13 Kemba had to also experience what was actually going on and have some thoughts about it as well as feelings. A certain difference between a 9-year-old and a 13-year-old is wondering, Why my family, why my mother, why this wonderful person, especially when I need her the most?

JEANNE BLAKE: So what happens if a family doesn't talk about that? I keep going back to that.

MARIA: Well, you miss this opportunity, don't you, to really strengthen coping skills, that is thinking about why me, why us. That's something, that if it's isolated and adults aren't there to respond to that. And it's not that we have answers. I certainly don't have answers. But to know that those are appropriate questions and that this young woman will have to struggle with it. She still, I'm sure,

struggles with why at 22 years old, or when I graduate from college will my mother not be there?

JEANNE BLAKE: I had a friend, a very, very dear friend, a few years ago who died from breast cancer as well and was resistant to talking with her children because it was so painful for her, and I understand that. But we talked about what a gift it would be to give her children to be able to have talked about it and give them that outlet for emotion. I think that if they don't do it then, there's some time in their life where they have to have the opportunity to do it. It will catch up. It will be there.

MARIA: That's right. It does catch up. That's right. So many times I'll give a lecture and a 40-something-year-old woman will come up and say, "I buried this when I was 7," or "I never had this opportunity," and my response is universally the same, "It's never too late." Because I think you limp a bit. There's either a pebble or it could be a boulder in your shoe, but you limp, and I think that unresolved losses do lead to difficulties with really forming intimate attachments later in life.

JEANNE BLAKE: Sure. And I think that the stories that we're seeing during this program are all based on the research around connections which you're familiar with, the adolescent health study, that young people who have connections within their family or within their community or within their peer group tend to make a safer transition into adulthood. And it does make just good common sense that those connections help young people thrive.

MARIA: Sure. And no one disagrees. Forming those connections and reaching out to kids who weren't always eager to have them, be willing to be rejected time after time ... I think that's the good advice for adults, to stand tall even in the face of the young person saying, You know, actually, no, I don't want to talk. Just your presence, I think, makes such a difference.

JEANNE BLAKE: Okay. Another loss we're going to talk about briefly is divorce, which, of course, with half of all families experiencing divorce, many, many families and many children are suffering this feeling of loss. And to personalize this a bit, we will hear just a small segment of the story of Judd from our program called Boys on Bullying.

[VIDEO CLIP]

JUDD: Thoughts came into my mind, like why don't I have any friends, why aren't people there to, you know, say Hey guys, stop it, you can see that he's hurting. It felt like with each word that they said there was little knives sticking into my heart, and it felt like I was breaking into little pieces inside

with each comment they said. And it got to a point where some days I would just come home, come in the door, go straight to my room, and just sit there for an hour, an hour and a half, my head in my pillow, thinking about what am I doing wrong here, why are they teasing me so badly?

NARRATOR: I mean, there was more conflict in Judd's life. His mom and dad were getting a divorce and fighting about where he and his brother would live.

JUDD: I was going through the teasing at school and then coming home to a family that had just split up, been flipped right upside down and been changed entirely. It was very hard for me to deal with emotionally.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: What Judd describes is, of course, another whole issue he was dealing with, but it's proof that suffering a divorce and a loss can exacerbate anything else that's going on in a child's life.

MARIA: Sure. When kids go out in the world and find that it can be mean and it can be difficult and they require problem-solving skills that they don't necessarily have, they want to return home to this wonderful, solid base of support, and when there's a fracture there it just exacerbates everything. You know, the family really does die, doesn't it, when there's a divorce. That is, the people and the players are still the same, but the constitution, the family as the child was promised -- you know, perhaps not verbally but it was just assumed it would always be -- the family goes away, the family dies and yet the players are still there. So there's this fantasy that maybe it will come together again, which makes it even more difficult.

JEANNE BLAKE: I never understood why children harbor that fantasy, but that's an interesting explanation. In Judd's case, his dad did reach out to him in a really remarkable way, and the story goes on to talk about how that connection really helped Judd open up, and his father was there for him and it helped resolve the bullying, too. So it's a really wonderful example of a parent seeing what was going on with his child, being aware, helping to pull it out of him, and Judd is thriving magnificently today, which is another happy ending. But I think it also underscores how important it is for parents to know the signs to look for and to be persistent to reach out.

MARIA: Well, I think what's remarkable is, while Judd's father is going through an acute loss of his own, which is the divorce, that he's able to put his child first.

JEANNE BLAKE: There you go.

MARIA: And what a great modeling that is. Now, Judd is a few years older as he talks on video, but he can remember that Dad was there for me then and helped me solve this, so Dad is here for me now and hopefully in the future. So something has remained the same through this very difficult loss, and that is Dad's presence. His own needs did not trump mine. And boy, for kids to know that and experience it, I don't know that life gets better. Our kids will suffer losses, but if they can really feel that adults are there for them.

JEANNE BLAKE: And the way that you've described that so well does translate into any other loss that a child would experience, and to have that presence there and to make it safe for them to talk about it.

MARIA: That's absolutely right. Plus, this child really got on top of something that was so painful for him. And with the help of ... his reaching out, and why don't people take care of me or help me out of this, and in the middle of it going home and finding that that support was not always there, because it is painful when Mom and Dad aren't both there.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think the thing that's interesting is that Judd's perception is that he couldn't open up and he went to his room, as so many kids do – that's how they deal with negative emotions – but for his father to have stood at the door, and one day when Judd came home from school and said, "Let's talk about what's going on," really turned his life around.

MARIA: We worry about all the kids that don't have adults that are knocking on the door or kids who cannot be kind of pulled out from their bedroom, and our feeling is that there's been enough safety in the past to go forward with it.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think so many times parents think, "Well, this is natural for a kid to withdraw a little bit and to go into their room and to crank up the music." How do you walk that fine line?

MARIA: Well, you have to know your child's temperament, number one. And I think you just keep reaching out. You really have to be very good about being rejected. I think if you're a parent of a

pre-adolescent or an adolescent, you've got to have a tough skin so you can say, "Would you like to ...," "I invite you ...," "I'd like to ...," and be willing to hear, "Actually, no." It's the asking of the question. It's saying, I'd like to be with you, I'd like to listen to you. And that's the operative word, too. I've realized every time that I say, "I want to talk to you," I should be saying, "I'd really like to listen to what it's been like for you today at school."

JEANNE BLAKE: That's a good tip for any parent, loss or not.

MARIA: And still be willing to hear, "Actually, no," as they crank up the music. The actual process really does matter. We've seen this time and time again.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's a very good point. And our final example of how a child can experience loss is an excerpt from the story of Wilson, also from Boys on Bullying, and Wilson lost one of his best friends, who was a victim of a shooting on the streets of the town where he lived.

[VIDEO CLIP]

NARRATOR: The months after his friend died, Wilson buried his emotions. He was afraid to tell anyone how he felt, including his parents.

WILSON: In my neighborhood, it wasn't really that ... you couldn't be open with friends. They would always just tell you to get over it, you know, you're a wimp if you're crying.

NARRATOR: An advisor saw that Wilson was angry and encouraged him to join a volunteer group. The advisor told him he thought that might help. Wilson joined the group, but at first he wouldn't talk. Then he realized he had to deal with everything that was building up inside.

WILSON: I should release my anger and at least tell this group what's wrong with me instead of letting them wonder, and if they know what's wrong with me maybe they can understand.

NARRATOR: Finally, one day while meeting with the group, Wilson took a chance.

WILSON: And I don't know, I just released everything, I told all my friends everything, what happened to me. It feels really good. It's just something heavy just lifted off your shoulder.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: Maria, this story, I think, exemplifies so many points. One, a child's natural reaction, I think, is to withdraw. Isn't that what you see more often than not?

MARIA: Well, that or being furious. That or rage when there's a random act of violence and it affects your life because your friend died. We get angry and then we withdraw and get depressed.

JEANNE BLAKE: So, actually, Wilson did both?

MARIA: He did.

JEANNE BLAKE: He was really asking for a lot of help.

MARIA: Sure, sure. And it is typical. It's a typical response. We become enraged at thinking that this could happen. Adults become enraged, but kids ... you know at this time of their life they're trying to kind of figure things out, to see that this might in fact be part of the landscape, it's so unfair.

JEANNE BLAKE: And it goes back to, as you described before, it's not the way that they learn to anticipate life.

MARIA: That's right.

JEANNE BLAKE: And lucky for Wilson, the counselor, the advisor suggested that he get involved and get out of the bedroom, where he was so depressed.

MARIA: How good is that counselor that he probably didn't ask him once, but really made it his job to keep on it and keep on with Wilson, and then how wonderful that Wilson was emotionally available enough to say, All right, I'll give this a shot. Because what we know is that when youngsters aren't isolated and have an opportunity to express the sadness, but also the anger, and usually sadness lies underneath anger, but the anger has to get a place to find its way to go. I mean, we talk about anger management. Even though everyone can understand why Wilson could be enraged, there have to be appropriate places to put the anger.

JEANNE BLAKE: And the good thing is that he's another example in these stories of a young man who ... I mean, to watch him interact with his friends, it was amazing to me to get to know Wilson and to

get to see the bonding and the emotional freedom that he had with his friends. It was amazing for a young man to be that open with how much he cared about his friend.

MARIA: Sure. And it's the peer group that rules when kids get to be adolescents, and so I think to have a place where emotions have a range there it's important. That is, to be able to feel and express more than just anger and revenge. It's very important, and we as adults have to model that for them, but it's their job to do it.

JEANNE BLAKE: So in the consulting that you do and the trainings that you do nationally, as you reach out to ... help me, is it healthcare providers, educators, anyone who works with young people?

MARIA: Yes. You know, I certainly find myself speaking to juvenile court judges and people involved in child welfare issues as well as educators, and certainly people who are health providers, anyone who is going to be involved in the life of a child. If we can really teach that person how to make a difference in the conversations, particularly when there's going to be a long-term relationship as pediatricians have or as a guidance counselor has, it's terribly important.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, how do you help them understand the way to open up the dialogue, because it sounds like the people you work with the most might be more inclined to run into young people who would be shut down. So how do you open up a child who is shut down because there has been some terrible experience that's caused them to be like that?

MARIA: Well, of course, it starts with the relationship. That is, to suggest that the person whom I'm training already has a relationship, so therefore it is better that the case manager in a foster care situation, or that the guidance counselor or that the pediatrician already has that relationship and therefore has this capacity to make such a difference. If she knows what the preschooler needs or what the adolescent needs and what the concerns are going to be at each developmental stage, I think that's one piece. The other piece ... we started a program called The Circle and it's certainly in Boston but it's a national model around the country, saying kids are isolated who have suffered losses and when you put kids together at developmentally appropriate ages with facilitated groups, it just is magical.

JEANNE BLAKE: You know, you're reminding me of a story that I heard actually from the director of the Betty Ford Center. I had recently produced a program about young people and underage drinking, and the director of the Betty Ford Center told me about a very powerful story of a support

group where a child observed another child being emotional and being upset and went over and put his arm around that child, and that kind of reaching out peer to peer is so much more powerful really, isn't it?

MARIA: Oh, yes. It's very big. And kids come every Monday night to our circle whether it's in the center of Boston, in the inner city, or whether it's out in the suburbs, and what they know is that every kid there has suffered the loss of a parent or a sibling, and that it's okay to be angry or it's okay to be sad, and it's really about finding the meaning.

JEANNE BLAKE: Especially at an age where they're already feeling so different, and to have that support from someone who's walking in their shoes has got to make it so okay for them to start ...

MARIA: To give them permission, it's really giving permission in a very concrete way. We insist that a parent take them or that somebody in the child's life take them, because it's not just enough to drop your child off at the door. It's to say, "I'm going to participate in a parallel way; I want to know that my child is making a scream box," which is a very cheap therapy. It's a squared-off Kleenex box with a paper towel holder, and no matter how much you yell into it, it's muffled. We put stuff inside. Well, why does a kid need a scream box? Because you're angry when someone dies. Parents, of course, love the scream boxes.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was going to say that next week we'll be having a demonstration on how to build a screen box with Maria Trozzi.

MARIA: It's very important.

JEANNE BLAKE: I love having you on this program and talking about these important subjects. And again, Maria Trozzi's book is *Talking with Children about Loss* and it's published by Putnam. Thank you again, Maria, and I hope you'll come back another time. And we'd like to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health TV*. I'll see you next time.

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