

## **In Green Pastures: Horses Comfort Children's Grief**

Sometimes children are left out of a family's mourning process. Not on purpose - it just happens. When you think about it, you can understand why. Let's say that a husband dies suddenly of a heart attack, leaving a widow and two children, ages 8 and 5. What goes through mom's mind? Somewhere amid the whirlwind of funeral arrangements and the settling of business affairs, the reality settles in that she is now leading a family without her partner. Suddenly, her mind is flooded with images of money, logistics, college, insurance, puberty, and on and on. So, if she looks around and observes that the kids are doing okay today, she probably breathes a sigh of relief and turns her attention to other matters.

Add to that the fact that children don't usually come to the forefront of a family's mental health needs until they act out or cause some kind of problem. And in that case, only the child who is acting out gets the attention while other sibling gets overlooked. Getting the picture? There are many reasons why a grieving child can be overlooked, and his or her needs may not surface for months, or even years. And they will seek out ways to cope, healthy or unhealthy, as they go it alone without a way to test their sense of reality, or without the necessary comfort that comes from caring adults.

Today, help is available through support programs that use trained adult facilitators and peer support. In an environment where kids can explore the meaning of death, and the feelings and thoughts that surround it, kids prepare themselves for a future without the person who died. In very special cases, horses can play a major role in the healing process. Horses Healing Grief was created for just that purpose, combining the healing power of horses to the supportive relationships of peers who have suffered a similar loss.

In this case, the horse becomes part of a powerful spiritual process. In the well-known 23rd Psalm, the writer speaks of a journey. Using the metaphor of a shepherd, he writes that sheep sometimes are led through scary places, but with the shepherd, they still find comfort and sustenance at different points along the way. The poem describes the inevitable dilemma of the human soul – the quest for peace in a perilous place.

Human companions help children find that place of peace by providing children a safe place in which to consider their grief, and horses can too. The very presence of horses projects an image of power and peacefulness at the same time, embodying the definition of meekness – power under restraint. Children can sense the power and the safety in ways that attract them to the horse, while the horse fills their imagination with the solutions to an otherwise unmanageable disturbance of the soul. By simply being there, the horse becomes a living presence that allows them to transcend their circumstance, and discover how to bear it at the same time.

When children grieve, their journey can be described from the viewpoint of the sheep in the Psalm. Life doesn't stop, and yet the way into the future can seem perilous. Things may not seem so bad for a while. Then, suddenly, they can be ambushed by unfamiliar, disquieting feelings, triggered by circumstances, questions, or even memories. Along the way, guidance and comforting at the hand of someone stronger and wiser would be welcomed. Horses can help provide that comfort and guidance, as grieving children discover how to navigate this unknown, dangerous territory more safely.

The journey is not linear, but cyclical, with waves of intense feelings ranging from anguish to deep sorrow to terror threatening every step. These powerful waves of emotion can seem perilous to a child, so they need a way to escape them until they learn how to manage them. Children may

want to talk about the one who died for a brief time; they may cry or show frustration or anger as feelings come to the surface, then suddenly return to the green pastures of play as if nothing ever happened. Play and fantasy gives children a safe way to manage intense emotions without feeling swept under by them, and they can do it without adult language or expectations. They escape to a place of safety for a short while, remaining keenly aware that the peril still exists.

In one of my summer sessions, one little girl about six years old was paired with a very large, black gelding, standing over 16 hands (64 inches), and weighing over 1200 pounds. He was imposing to me, an experienced horse handler, but for that little girl, whose world suddenly had been torn apart when her older brother died at home, that big horse was “handsome”, and she poured herself into him in ways that reminded me of characters in a fairy tale. Her gaze, her touch, and her movement around him revealed that she had been transported to another world. I virtually expected that the horse would turn and speak some words of wisdom to her, or produce Pegasus wings and sweep her away into the sky. Well, he did speak, but not verbally, and he did sweep her away. In that fantasy place where little girls need to go to try to sort out the crazy things that happen in the real world, that horse spoke safety, peace, and comfort to a troubled heart, and she accepted it unconditionally. He could have frightened her, and made the world seem more unsafe. Instead, he swept her away, to a world in which that was impossible. As he accepted the gentle touch of her tiny fingertips, the anxiety that was often present in her in any other setting was nowhere to be found. He comforted her.

As children work through the emotional cycles of their grief, horses can provide a kind of oasis – a resting place – where they can turn for momentary relief from the intense feelings, in much the same way as when children turn to play for relief. However, this oasis is not a place, but a living being, connecting them to life, and accompanying them as they explore their changed lives. As they work through the cycles of the grieving process, children can turn from their intense work and focus their attention on the horse from time to time, allowing them to find rest from the journey, food for the soul, and strength to go on.

Whether actively mourning, or simply sitting still and pondering their grief, horses can play a major role in the healing processes of children. When adults don't have the right words, or when children can't talk about it because it's just too hard, the silent companionship of a horse may be just what they need. I have never known a better comforter for my own grief or a better partner-companion when I am helping grieving children.