



MOMINTHEMIX

WITH FANNE MWAMBI

I think it's safe to say children were the glue that stuck families together back in the day. Many couples stuck together for the sake of their children. My parents make part of this statistic. Mothers, especially, bore emotional and physically draining marriages because their children were, in the least, educated.

Today, while many learn to step away from unhealthy relationships, children still top the reason we fight to stay afloat.

Children are a reason to keep fight-

Children are your best inspiration

ing When I sit and look at the things I have achieved today, I realise I had my children in mind through them all, from my investments to the rush to complete my projects. If it were not for them, I'd probably be wasting away all my cash if I'd be working at all. I'd probably be chasing after my dreams to win a bet or for fun. What's for sure is that I would not take care of myself as well as I do now because I realise I

mind my safety, watch what I eat and drink mainly for my children's sake.

One reason to be better

One woman on my social circles said that mothers are not afraid to die. They only worry about leaving their children with no one to love and care for them as they do. I realised the truth in this because, without my children in the equation, nothing would pin me down. I probably wouldn't be as

responsible and accountable as I am at work. I would perhaps sneak off work every Friday and crawl back on Mondays if I have to.

When we have responsibility on our shoulders, we become more focused on becoming better versions of ourselves. If we won't do it for our ambitions, we'll at least want to show our young ones that they too can. Keep fighting. Keep trying. Nothing you do is in vain.



PARENTING

Helping children cope with grief

Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death. **Joseph Ngaara** shares how he walked with his friend's little ones to help them not only process death, but also move on

by Ann Wairimu
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In this time of Covid-19 pandemic, many families are experiencing loss of loved ones. It's not easy for an adult to deal with their own grief and help a child grief. Therefore, children could be overlooked in such situations. Even in ordinary times, children are often left out of discussions and events surrounding death as adults around them are preoccupied with their own grief and overwhelmed by preparations and planning.

"I lost my husband in June this year. One moment he was alive and well, the next he was struggling to breathe. Even before I could process this, he passed on. It was devastating. Given the short period given to bury a person who has succumbed to Covid-19 (72 hours), I was busy throughout preparing for burial, sourcing for financing and making sure my husband got a decent send-off no matter what," says Maryanne Waweru, a mother of two.

Maryanne admits how tough things were, especially since physical support of family and friends was limited.

"People were afraid of contracting the virus, though my children and I had been tested and the results came out negative. There was literally no shoulder to lean on. I remember holding on to my children as we waited when the body was being lowered to the grave," she recalls.

Since then, her 10-year-old daughter has become anxious of everything and sometimes have nightmares. Her five-year-old son has also become clingy.

Five days of grieving, learning

Joseph Ngaara, a children's champion, social mobiliser and inspirational writer, with a blog, *Stories of Triumph and Tragedy*, says he became interested in grief counselling after he lost a friend last year to a chronic illness.

"She left behind a widower and four



children. While visiting to condole with the family, I bumped into a pastor friend who was counselling the children. I was awestruck by this idea. This friend noted that children are a forgotten lot during loss and grief. She said how adults gather around the bereaved adult, but no one thinks of attending the bereaved children," he recalls.

Joseph agreed to hook up with this friend some other time for mentorship in this field. "A week after burying our departed friend, I lost another friend, this time to Covid-19. He left behind a widow and five children, two in their teens and three aged between two and eight years. I felt I needed a crash programme on grief counselling and reached out to my pastor friend. She broke down her approach to grief counselling, which I used with these five children," he shares.

Basically, the content is covered in one-hour portions everyday within the week of grieving, before burial. First, Joseph talked to them about death, defining what it means to die. Surprisingly, young children don't fully understand the concept of death.

"On the first day, we defined death as stopping to breath, closing eyes and not being able to talk, walk or eat, ever again. This helped children internalise that the dead person is gone forever. On the second day, we tackled the question of where dead people go. Depending on the spiritual-

ity and age of the children, we discuss resurrection and the hope of seeing their departed loved one in heaven. But before that, we talked about the mortuary. For young children, we defined mortuary as a big fridge where dead bodies are kept (like fresh food) so that they don't rot and smell. As part of learning, we drew and coloured a morgue, showing their father is well kept in a cold room," he explains.

On the third day, they discussed their hopes. "First, we recollected memories of dad. Recounting special things and treats he used to do with them and memorable places they visited together. This effort was to encourage them to replay memories and remind them that although their dad was gone/dead, his memories remain in their hearts. We also touched on promises their dad made, but never fulfilled by the time of his death. This created a list of expectations that I shared with their mother, for her follow up, to mitigate effects of death on the children," Joseph adds.

Goodbye letters, follow-up list

On the fourth day, Joseph helped the children look at the significant people in their lives apart from their departed dad. The children mentioned names of uncles, aunties, grandparents and neighbours who play a role in their wellbeing. "We translated this list to follow up phone calls with these individuals, to inform them that



Joseph Ngaara. COURTESY

they are considered important by these children and should reach out and support them now that their dad was no more. We used the list to remind the children that God had placed many other people in their lives, and only one had been taken. This wasn't to minimise the pain or loss, but to give them hope that not all their loved ones died," he says.

On day five, they covered aspects of the funeral. Notably, some children have never attended a funeral. They are left out not knowing what happens to the body of someone who dies.

"As part of the learning, we wrote goodbye letters to their dad, saying things they remembered and will forever cherish in their hearts. We used these letters as the children's tribute in the eulogy. We also drew a coffin and put flowers around it. This helped to memorialise their emotions and experience," he shares.

Joseph says not many adults appreciate that children need to grieve. He says at one time one of the relatives discouraged the eldest child from crying telling him he is a big boy and that men don't cry. This, he says, is stereotyping and could potentially harm the child by repressing his emotions. Other times, relatives would interrupt the counselling by calling out and sending children for errands, unaware of the importance of the sessions.

Joseph says it was fulfilling to see the transformation. "Children should not be shielded from loss and grief, because they are imminent anyway. Rather, loss and grief should be openly discussed with them, especially now that death and disease have become too common," he says.

AT A GLANCE

- Covid-19 has resulted to over 4.3 million deaths worldwide
- Children feel and show their grief in different ways, and how they cope often depends on the support they receive.
- For younger children, their language is play, so parents can do things at home with art, such as encouraging them to draw their feelings or a favourite memory of the loved one.
- Teens tend to become withdrawn or show symptoms of depression or bouts of anger, so the best way to reach out to a grieving child is by listening.