



Children's Grief **What Does it Look Like?**

Children do grieve differently than adults. Children do not have the capacity to deal with intense emotions all day long like many adults do. Instead, children grieve "in doses", alternating between times of play and intense emotions.

A child's age and developmental stage determines their understanding and ability to cope with the death of a loved one. Many children need to "re-grieve" their loss with each new level of development.

The following is a guide to help you understand and prepare you for likely responses to death in each of the developmental stages:

Infants and Toddlers

- They do not understand death and its permanence.
- They respond mostly to the reactions of those around them and sense that something is wrong.
- They are most affected by disruptions in routine and care giving that result after a death in the family.

Common Reactions

- Cry more than usual
- Sleep more or less than before the death
- Change eating patterns
- Show stress at separating from parent/caregiver

What They Need

- Keep routines and physical surroundings as consistent and familiar as possible.
- Offer comfort (rock, hold, sing and talk to, etc) as much as possible.

Preschool

- Do not understand the permanence of death. See it as a temporary loss or separation and may talk about the person coming back.
- May confuse death with sleep or connect the death with events that preceded it (i.e. going to the hospital or being sick).
- Believe that someone who is dead can feel cold, hungry, or lonely.
- Have “Magical Thinking” and believe that something they said or thought caused the death.

Common Reactions

- May forget the person died.
- Ask questions related to the death over and over.
- Physical symptoms may appear (i.e. headaches, stomach aches)
- Fear that others around may die too.
- Show more “clingy” behavior and have difficulties separating from parent/caregivers.
- Regress in behavior (baby-talk, thumb-suck, wet pants).
- Have bad dreams, experience difficulty going to bed at night.

What They Need

- Repeat the facts in simple and honest language.
- Explain death in concrete terms such as “someone who is dead can’t breathe, feel hungry or cold, or grow”.
- Maintain schedules and routines as consistently as possible.
- Encourage the child to talk about his/her feelings and ask questions.
- Provide physical contact, calm soothing tones, quiet times, show affection.
- Reassure them about their future and safety.

Ages 6-8

- Begin to understand the permanence of death.
- Great interest in the body and its functions, the causes of death, and the physical processes to the body after death.
- Still may be “Magical Thinkers” and feel responsible for the death

Common Reactions

- Often have 'gory' conversations and questions.
- Ask a lot of questions about burial and cremation and body processes.
- Experience bad dreams, difficulties in school, increased anger, and have physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- May feel responsible for the death.

What They Need

- Patience when they ask the same questions repeatedly.
- Encourage them to ask questions and talk about their feelings.
- Provide concrete and honest explanations to their questions.
- Maintain schedules and routines as consistently as possible.
- Offer comfort and affection.
- Provide opportunities for non-verbal ways of expression (i.e. play, art, physical exercise, listening to music, time alone).
- Reassure them about their safety and that the death was not their fault.

Ages 9-12

- Understand the permanence of death.
- Show interest in what happens to a person's body and spirit after death.
- Begin to understand the universality of death and develop social concerns (i.e. wonder what impact the death has on others).

Common Reactions

- May cover up emotions and try to appear 'normal'.
- May feel responsible for the death.
- Show concern for the safety and future of other family members.
- Experience bad dreams, increased anger and acting-out behaviors.
- Endless questions about the death.
- May have difficulties concentrating at school or completing homework assignments.

What They Need

- Honest, accurate information about the death.
- Encouragement to ask questions and to talk about their feelings.
- Reassurance about their own future and other family members'.
- Participate in decision making regarding rituals.
- Respect their need for privacy.
- Provide opportunities for non-verbal ways of expression (i.e. sports, play, music, art).