

Information on Children and Grief

Grief can be difficult to watch in children. You want them to be able to escape the pain of losing a friend or loved one. Bereaved children are particularly sensitive to verbal and nonverbal signs of adults to stop their grief and confusion. Children need to know that they are safe to think about and express their loss.

Common Feelings, Thoughts, and Behaviors of the Grieving Child

Child retells events of the deceased's death and funeral.

Child dreams of the deceased.

Child feels the deceased is with him or her in some way.

Child rejects old friends and seeks new friends who have experienced a similar loss.

Child wants to call home during the school day.

Child can't concentrate on homework or class work.

Child bursts into tears in the middle of class.

Child seeks medical information on death of deceased.

Child worries excessively about his or her own health.

Child sometimes appears to be unfeeling about loss.

Child becomes "class clown" to get attention.

Child is overly concerned with caretaking needs.

To help a child during a loss parents can:

1. Give prompt and accurate information about what has happened and be allowed to ask questions. Give the information in a simple manner that your child can understand.
2. Answer their questions honestly. If you don't know the answer to their question it is ok to say "I don't know".
3. Participate in honoring the life of the deceased. Explain your feelings to your child especially if you are crying. It is important for children to see adults express their feelings and for children to be able to share their feelings also.
4. Give comfort and listen, listen, listen. Ask your child questions to better understand what they may be thinking or feeling.
5. Think of ways your child can say good bye to the person who has died.
6. Watch for behavior changes in your child at both home or at school.

Parents may see the following reactions to grief from their children:

Tearfulness

Irritability

Clinging to you

Whiney

Unable to concentrate

More pronounced fears

Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches, feeling tired)

Regressive behavior

Aggressive behavior

These are normal reactions to grief, however, if you see these reactions as more intense, or lasting longer than you think they should do not hesitate to consult a professional. Also if you notice frequent nightmares, recurrent depression, negative outlook loneliness, or a sense of alienation from others consult a mental health professional or your pediatrician.

Here is a chart of grief and developmental stages from the National Cancer Institute:

Grief and Developmental Stages

Age	Understanding of Death	Expressions of Grief
Infancy to 2 years	Is not yet able to understand death.	Quietness, crankiness, decreased activity, poor sleep, and weight loss.
	Separation from mother causes changes.	
2–6 years	Death is like sleeping.	Asks many questions (How does she go to the bathroom? How does she eat?).
		Problems in eating, sleeping, and bladder and bowel control.
		Fear of abandonment.
		Tantrums.
	Dead person continues to live and function in some ways.	Magical thinking (Did I think something or do something that caused the death? Like when I said I hate you and I wish you would die?).
	Death is temporary, not final.	
Dead person can come back to life.		
6–9 years	Death is thought of as a person or spirit (skeleton, ghost, bogeyman).	Curious about death.
		Asks specific questions.
		May have exaggerated fears about school.
	Death is final and frightening.	May have aggressive behaviors (especially boys).
		Some concerns about imaginary illnesses.
Death happens to others; it will not happen to ME.	May feel abandoned.	
9 and older	Everyone will die.	Heightened emotions, guilt, anger, shame.
		Increased anxiety over own death.
		Mood swings.
	Death is final and cannot be changed.	Fear of rejection; not wanting to be different from peers.
	Even I will die.	Changes in eating habits.
		Sleeping problems.
		Regressive behaviors (loss of interest in outside activities).
Impulsive behaviors.		
	Feels guilty about being alive (especially related to death of a brother, sister, or peer).	

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References

Life & Loss (2000) <http://www.childrensgrief.net/info%20%20helping%20children%20with%20grief%20issues.htm>

National Cancer Institute

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/HealthProfessional/page7>

“Some guidelines for parents to help their child through grief” prepared by Helen Fitzgerald, CDE