

Navigating Children's Grief



Age	Concepts & Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth-2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No understanding of death Child does not have words for feelings Aware of the absence of loved one Notices changes in routine Notices changes in family emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Longing Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one Fears of being abandoned Anxiety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Crying Sickness Indigestion Thrashing Rocking Throwing Sucking, biting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance Maintain routines Meet immediate physical needs Include the child in the mourning process when possible Be gentle & patient
3-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No understanding of permanence of death To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip May wonder what deceased is doing Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear Sadness Insecurity Confusion Anger Irritable Agitated Worried Guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regressive behaviors Repetitive questions Withdrawn Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings Interested in dead things Acts as if death never happened Intense dreams Physical complaints Crying Fighting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow the child to regress Give physical contact Encourage children to play & have fun Allow safe ways to express feeling Give simple & truthful answers to questions Maintain structure and routines Answer repetitive questions Let the child cry Talk (reflective listening) Include child in family rituals & mourning

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Age	Concepts & Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
6-9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands that death is final Interested in the biology of death Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death Death is punishment Forming spiritual concepts Who will care for me if my caregiver dies Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sad Anger Lonely Withdrawn Worried Anxious Irritable Confusion Guilty Fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regressive behaviors Specific questioning/looking for details Acts as if the death never happened Hides feelings Withdrawal Nightmares/sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Declining or greatly improved grades Aggressive acting out Protective of surviving loved ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow need to regress Give physical contact Have intentional times together Answer questions truthfully Watch for confusion Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning Find peer support for the child Work with school to tailor workload
9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands the finality of death Denial His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) High death awareness (death may happen again) What if my caregiver dies? Formulating spiritual concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes Shock Sad Anger Confused Lonely Vulnerable Fear Worried Guilty Isolated Abandoned Anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods Hides feelings Acts like death never happened Aggressive acting out Withdrawal Nightmares & sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Changes in grades Talks about physical aspects of illness or death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort Expect & accept mood swings Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. Find peer support groups Be available to listen & talk Answer questions truthfully Offer physical contact Give choices about involvement in death & mourning
12 years and up (teenagers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands the finality & universality of death Denial His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) High death awareness (death may happen again) May sense own impending death I need to be in control of feelings If I show my feelings I will be weak Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence May utilize spiritual concepts to cope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief Shock Sad Anger Confused Lonely Vulnerable Fear Worried Guilty Isolated Abandoned Anxious 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occasional regressive behavior Mood swings Hides feelings Acts like death never happened Acts out role confusion Aggressive acting out Withdrawal Nightmares & sleep disturbances Concentration difficulties Changes in grades, impulsive & high risk behavior Changes in peer groups Fighting, screaming, arguing Changes in eating patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort Expect & accept mood swings Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. Support relationships with understanding adults Be available to listen & talk Answer questions truthfully Share your grief Watch for high risk behavior Find peer support groups Offer physical contact Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning

Tips for Grieving Children

- 1. Surround yourself with loving and caring adults.** Grief can cause us to want to be alone. Try your best to talk to someone once in a while. Talking to a trusted adult, family member, friend of the family, guidance counselor, pastor, teacher or social worker can be helpful.
- 2. Ask questions.** When someone important to you has died, it's confusing and uncertain. Ask about the death, changes in your own life and what the future brings. If you need more answers, ask more questions or keep a list of questions you want to ask.
- 3. Answers may take time.** Grieving is difficult for adults too. Your question may not have an answer yet or you may be told "we'll talk about it later." Understand you may not have an answer to all your questions right away.
- 4. Expressing your thoughts and feelings** can mean talking to someone when you're ready. It can also mean you're not ready to talk to anyone. Do an activity that helps you express your feelings: listen to music, play sports, keep a journal, exercise, write letters, talk to the person who has died, pray, paint, meditate, do yoga, sketch, draw, garden, color or even cook. You don't have to be social to express yourself and your feelings.
- 5. You may not feel like doing what you normally do** and it's okay to say you are not interested in something, if you're really not. It takes time to heal.
- 6. Sometimes, we will never understand why things happened the way they did.** Sometimes there are no answers. Sometimes we just know someone important in our lives has died. It may be very difficult to accept the way things are. It takes time to heal.
- 7. Tell "your story"** whenever you want. It's okay to tell your story over and over and over again. When you talk about what happened, tell what you know and talk about how it all makes you feel, it helps you heal.
- 8. It may be hard focus and remember things.** This is very normal! When someone close to us dies, we have so many feelings our brain cannot sort out those feelings. Be patient with yourself if thoughts and words don't come to you like they used to.
- 9. Your friends may distance themselves from you. When someone important to you has died, some of your friends** may act awkward around you, even avoid hanging out with you. It's not because they don't care, it's because they may not understand what you're going through. They may be afraid they'll say the wrong thing. You can break the ice by talking or getting together just to tell your story. The more you can open up, the more they'll understand. It's okay not to have the right words. Just being friends is all that matters.
- 10. Quality time helps you gauge your child's affect** (the expression of emotion or feelings displayed to others through facial expressions, hand gestures, voice tone and other emotional signs such as laughter or tears.)
- 10. If you have a stomach ache or headache,** let a responsible adult know how you're feeling. When you're grieving, it's normal to have days when you aren't feeling your best.
- 11. Are you fighting or arguing more with people?** Are there days when you're bursting with anger and just can't scream enough? Emotional outbursts are really common; however, are you lashing out at people who don't deserve it? When you have feelings bottled up, find an activity that helps you get your feelings out.
- 12. It's okay to have fun.** Laughing, wanting to be with friends and playing is normal. It doesn't mean you don't love the person who died. Even though you are grieving, it's okay to enjoy your life. You will continue to have happy moments, celebrations and fun times and it's okay to enjoy these.
- 13. If you feel like you might harm yourself or others tell a trusted adult.**

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Tips for Parents and Care Providers: Helping a Grieving Child Cope

- 1. Active listening builds trust and reassurance.** Take the time to observe and respond to speech, behavior and body language. When your child feels understood and feels that their thoughts and emotions matter, you can open the door to deeper conversations.
- 2. Maintain daily routines and encourage play.** Keeping a familiar structure to the day provides a feeling of safety and reassurance. Encourage sleep overs, social interactions and any other organized sports or obligations as appropriate.
- 3. Talk about memorials, rituals, celebrations and services** in detail including how, where, and when the events will take place. If you're planning an open casket wake, discuss what it will mean to view the body. The more children understand, the more they feel a sense of control in stressful situations and environments. Let your children guide their own level of involvement.
- 4. Talk about and remember the person who died.** Use the person's name and encourage your children to share what they remember.
- 5. Children look to us to learn how to grieve.** When there's reason to celebrate, laugh, and experience joy, do so with your children. They need to know it's ok to feel happy and it's ok to celebrate important moments through loss.
- 6. Difficult conversations are necessary.** Offer the opportunity for your children to be involved as much or as little as they desire when planning rituals: they may want to be completely hands off and they may want to contribute something: stories, poems, cards, pictures or meaningful items. A child may wish to speak or read at a service. Gauge their involvement according to their comfort level.
- 7. Active parenting means acknowledging what our kids are doing right and addressing undesirable behaviors.** As a family, revisit responsibilities, rewards, privileges and consequences. Children need to know it's ok to express their emotions: let them brainstorm all the emotions they're feeling and how each one makes them want to act differently. Let your children offer input deciding if a new boundary is needed. Let them brainstorm how they can earn privileges and rewards. Children also need to have input to discuss consequences. Consistency is the key.
- 8. Share your own grief.** Within reason we don't want to shelter our children from the heartache, we want to work through it with them. It's ok to cry in front of your children.
- 9. Remember that children express grief in different ways.** Grief can look like self-isolation and shutting down. It can look like emotional outbursts, tantrums or regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, and self soiling. It can also manifest as self-harm.
- 10. Quality time helps you gauge your child's affect** (the expression of emotion or feelings displayed to others through facial expressions, hand gestures, voice tone and other emotional signs such as laughter or tears.)
- 11. Take care of yourself.** Do your best to eat well, exercise, rest and keep up or explore hobbies.
- 12. Keep a positive perspective.** In the midst of loss, it's hard to feel grateful. Try each day to make family time to talk about the things that you're thankful for in your life.

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