

Developmental Stages of Children Affect Their Grieving

Infancy to two years:

Infants have no concept of death, but do react to the emotions of their caregivers. They also will react to the absence of a person who has been primary in their daily life.

Common reactions:

- Irritability, anxiety
- Expresses protest by crying angrily or unconsolably
- Clingy behavior or separation anxiety
- Difficulty sleeping, restless, rocking behaviors
- Indigestion, sucking, biting

How to help the grieving infant:

Keep routine as normal as possible. Offer physical reassurance and nurturance through extra holding, cuddling. Be very patient. Let others help with household tasks so primary caregivers can spend more time with the infant.

Toddlers / Preschoolers: two to five years

At these ages children lack a clear sense of time, future, or duration. They live mostly in the present. They play with “gone”, e.g. games of peek-a-boo, but do not understand permanence. In cartoons, the character dies but comes back in the next scene. The pre-school aged child tends to believe death is reversible and expects the person to come back. Uses magical thinking to explain what they don’t understand.

Common reactions:

- Will ask the same questions over and over. May tell strangers what happened. These are ways the child is trying to understand – through re-telling, re-hearing and picking up cues from the adults’ responses.
- May regress to infantile behavior (loss of bowel or bladder control, thumb-sucking, baby talk).
- Clingy behavior, resists separation. May throw temper tantrums or cry at times of separation.
- May sense that something profound has happened. Picks up emotions from adults, but without comprehension of what it means.
- May have nightmares or trouble sleeping.
- May act out their feelings, their sense of what happened, and their confusion in play.
- Will shift in and out of emotional distress and normal play.

How to help the grieving preschooler:

State the fact of death; keep explanations honest and brief. Avoid euphemisms. Encourage the child to ask questions. Let the child tell the story over and over. Keep answering the same questions when they are repeated. Tell the child what to expect. Allow choice about participation in rituals. If the child chooses to attend rituals, explain fully what will happen, and make sure another adult is available to take over with the child if he/she is unable to stay in the room. Hold him/her more and comfort their tears or confusion. Be patient with regressive behaviors and “accidents”. Encourage older preschoolers to draw pictures or color their feelings. Allow time to reminisce, look at pictures, and acknowledge their feelings (as well as yours). Don’t punish or criticize the child for playing, laughing and engaging in normal behavior, or accuse them of being selfish or not caring. **Continued next pg**

School-aged Children: ages six to nine/ten

By six or seven most children understand that death is permanent and irreversible. They also begin to recognize that people they love could die, including themselves. They may express fear of death and may personalize death (e.g. the grim reaper, the angel of death). They are more capable of using language to process their experience and identify feelings.

Common reactions:

- Crying spells interspersed with returning to normal activities and play.
- May feel responsible for causing the death.
- Anxiety, restlessness, fear of more loss, possibly loss of motivation.
- Difficulty concentrating at school, short term memory may be impaired, forgets/loses things.

How to help the grieving school-aged child:

Encourage art and storytelling to express their feelings/describe their experience. Respond to their needs without being judgmental or punishing. Listen to their concerns: reassure regarding fears of more loss (health of child and other family members); explain that they are not responsible for the death. Avoid using clichés. Answer questions. It's okay for adults to not know all the answers. Help child see connection between manifestations of grief and the loss of loved one. Talk with teachers/help to adjust expectations if child is struggling with workload.

Pre-adolescence: ages ten to thirteen

Preadolescence is a time of great physical change. Understanding cause and effect allows children in this age group to begin to understand how this loss will impact their life. They understand that death is forever and are realistic about the meaning of death. Are able to talk about their experience and feelings, but still need physical outlets (play, exercise) and distraction.

Common Reactions:

- May be curious about the physiological aspects of death—what happens to the body and how doctors/health professionals care for the sick and dying.
- May have psychosomatic symptoms (headaches, cold, digestive upsets).
- May fluctuate between needing family support and needing peer support.
- May take inappropriate responsibility for younger siblings or be protective of grieving parents.
- Grades may fall; may be distracted, daydream, have difficulty competing assignments.
- May be hostile, distant, blaming of others for the loss, resenting changes in family/routines.

How to Help the Pre-adolescent:

Be compassionate, answer questions. Don't reprimand for problems at school, but do give support. Give permission to vent feelings. Answer questions or help them find answers from others if necessary. Listen, listen, listen. Give hugs if they are willing. If they express separation anxiety, be patient. Give reassurance about fears. Encourage but don't force participation in formal and informal rituals/commemorative activities. Be understanding of mood swings.

Adapted from The Dougy Center and American Academy of Bereavement materials