

Developmental Issues of Grieving Children And How To Help

Infant and Toddler:

- can read facial expressions and sense the emotions of people around him/her
- senses rather than understands that something has happened
- expresses grief through behaviors and play rather than words

What to expect:

- general anxiety
- crying
- sleeplessness or extensive sleeping
- eating problems
- needing to be held
- separation anxiety
- regression
- irritability and temper tantrums

What to do:

- provide lots of physical contact and nurturing
- provide a consistent routine
- provide concrete rules and limits
- explain very simply and truthfully what has happened
- make time for play

Preschooler:

- believes death is reversible, cannot understand “forever”
- experiences death as abandonment
- “magical thinking” may cause child to believe he/she caused death or can bring the dead person back
- intense but brief grief responses
- will ask repeatedly about the death
- will express grief through play rather than words
- may regress to earlier stages

What to expect:

- changes in eating and sleeping
- regression (thumb-sucking, wanting help with feeding and dressing, baby talk, bed-wetting)
- confusion
- irritability
- worries about safety and being abandoned, that others will die

What to do:

- give simple, concrete explanations
- repeat as often as asked
- include child in funeral or memorial ritual
- encourage play
- accept expressions of anger
- be consistent in routines
- allow regression
- provide lots of physical closeness and nurturing
- read story books about death and loss

Elementary School Age Child:

- has lots of questions about how life will be different, how the person died, what happened to the body, etc.
- may express wish to be with the dead person
- beginning to understand death is permanent
- may worry about own death and death of others
- may feel guilty about the death
- difficulty staying focused in school and completing assignments
- trouble sleeping, nightmares

What to expect:

- regression
- fighting, anger
- trouble paying attention, daydreaming
- withdrawn
- sleepiness
- trouble completing school assignments

What to do:

- be truthful, clear, accurate with explanations
- encourage expression through art, journaling, music
- encourage physical activities
- maintain routines and structure but be flexible
- encourage expression of feelings

Middle School Age Child:

- already experiencing physical and hormonal changes
- physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping problems, eating changes)
- range of emotions
- does not want to be treated differently
- more verbal but still needs physical outlets
- understand death as final and unavoidable
- may increase risk-taking behaviors
- feels helpless and hopeless

What to expect:

- arguments, anger, fighting
- withdrawal
- inability to concentrate
- risk-taking behavior such as stealing, using drugs, premature sex
- moodiness and inconsistent reactions

What to do:

- accept mood swings
- be supportive and encourage sharing
- accept increase in physical concerns
- encourage support from a number of sources including group support
- listen and don't be afraid to model healthy grieving

High School Adolescent:

- adult understanding of death, that death is universal, inevitable, irreversible
- yet believes death won't happen to him/her
- depression, denial, anger
- risk-taking and acting out behaviors indicate challenging death
- fights against needing help because he/she wants to be independent
- death is romanticized—not really in touch with the finality of death

What to expect:

- withdrawal from parent and other adults
- anger
- increased risk-taking
- pushing limits
- lack of concentration
- increased time with friends
- sadness

What to do:

- listen
- encourage expression of feeling
- be truthful and factual in explanations
- model appropriate grieving responses
- be flexible

Above information was taken from:

Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers from the Doughy Center

Helping Children Cope with Death from the Doughy Center

How Do We Tell the Children? by Dan Schaeffer and Christine Lyons

The Grieving Child by Helen Fitzgerald