



A DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDE TO SUPPORTING & UNDERSTANDING A CHILD'S COMMON RESPONSES TO GRIEF

Children and adults grieve in different ways. In fact, grief is as individualistic as our fingerprints. While adults may have the capacity and vocabulary to deal with intense emotions throughout the day, most children do not. A bereaved child will alternate between moments of intense emotions and times of play.

A child's ability to understand and cope with death varies according to their age and stage of development. Commonly, children who experience a death at a certain age may necessarily re-grieve their loss when they reach a new developmental phase.

Ahead are a few points outlined to help you understand some of your child's common responses to the death of a someone significant in his or her life.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS:

- They do not understand the permanence of death
- They commonly respond to the reactions of those around them and are able to recognize that something has changed
- They are easily affected by changes in their routine or caregiver resulting from a death in the family

Common Responses

- May cry more than usual
- Possible increase or decrease in sleep
- Possible increase or decrease in eating
- Possible increase in separation anxiety

How you can help

- Try to keep routines consistent and familiar
- Offer comfort; cuddling, singing, talking, etc.. whenever possible



PRESCHOOL AGE:

- Boys are usually intrigued with death at this age
- May believe death is temporary and the person will come back
- May confuse death with sleeping or believe person died because they went to the hospital or were ill
- May believe that someone who has died will be hungry, cold, ect...
- May believe that something they said or did caused the death or made the person go away

Common Responses

- May not remember the person died and may ask **repeatedly** when will the person be coming back
- May ask the same questions over and over
- May develop physical symptoms; headaches, tummy aches
- May develop a fear that others will die
- May experience separation anxiety or more clingy behaviour
- May regress in behaviours; bed wetting, wetting pants, thumb sucking, baby talk
- Possible increase in bad dreams and difficulty going to bed

How you can Help

- Repeat the facts with simplicity and honesty
- Explain death in concrete terms; “someone who is dead does not feel cold, hungry or afraid”
- Continue to, if possible, maintain regular schedules and routines
- Encourage child to talk about their feelings and to ask any questions. **Understand children don’t talk like adults about their feelings and will act them out more through play**
- Be available for physical comfort and quality time
- Reassure their safety and those they love



6-8 YEAR OLDS:

- Begin to understand that death is permanent but may forget the person has died from time to time

Common Responses

- May have detailed questions about the death, and what happens to the body or discussions with 'gory' details
- May experience increase in bad dreams, difficulty at school, increased anger, or develop physical symptoms; headaches, stomach aches
- May feel responsible for the death somehow
- Possible increase in bad dreams and difficulty going to bed

How you can Help

- Have patience when the repeatedly ask questions
- Encourage questions and provide honest and consistent answers
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings. **Understand children don't talk like adults about their feelings and will act them out more through play.**
- Do not dismiss feelings of anger, fear, sorrow and guilt. These are common responses
- Continue with regular schedules where possible
- Offer physical and emotional comfort
- Do things they enjoy; play, music, reading stories
- Reassure their safety concerns and that they are not responsible for the death



9-12 YEAR OLDS:

- Begins to understand the permanence of death but may forget from time to time that the person has died
- Most likely to be interested in cause of death and what happens to the body
- Begins to wonder and be aware about the impact death has on others

Common Responses

- May try to appear normal and hide emotions in public
- May feel responsible for death
- May be concerned for safety and health of family members
- May experience an increase in bad dreams, anger, and acting out
- May begin to ask questions about death, may request more detailed info
- May experience difficulty concentrating at school or lack of attention on homework

How you can Help

- Be honest and consistent with information about the death
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings and that none of their feelings are wrong.
Understand children don't talk like adults about their feelings and will act them out more through play
- Provide reassurance for safety of themselves and other family members
- Encourage their participation in memorial rituals
- Respect their grieving style, understand if they would like to be alone or do not cry all of the time
- Provide non-verbal ways of expression; sports, play, music, art

Information adapted from Hospice Calgary Society. "When Children Grieve: A Guide for Offering Group Support to Grieving Children", Hospice Victoria. [Healing the Bereaved Child](#), A. Wolfelt (1996). [Helping Children Cope with Grief](#), A. Wolfelt (1983).