

Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death

| Age | Concepts and 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 Sickliness Indigestion Thrashing Rocking Throwing Sucking, biting Sleeplessness | <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 Regressive behaviors Repetitive questions Withdrawn Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings Interested in dead things Acts as if death never happened Intense dreams Physical complaints Crying Fighting | 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 |
| 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 Sad Anger Lonely Withdrawn Worried Anxious Irritable Confusion Guilty Fear | 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 |

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|-----------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| 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 and 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 and 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 |

