

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

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth–2 years	- 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	- Longing - Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one - Fears of being abandoned - Anxiety	- Crying - Sickliness - Indigestion - Thrashing - Rocking - Throwing - Sucking, biting - Sleeplessness	- 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	- 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	- Fear - Sadness - Insecurity - Confusion - Anger - Irritable - Agitated - Worried - Guilty	- Regressive behaviors - Repetitive questions - Withdrawn - Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings - Interested in dead things - Acts as if death never happened - Intense dreams - Physical complaints - Crying -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	- 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	- 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.)	- Sad - Anger - Lonely - Withdrawn - Worried - Anxious - Irritable - Confusion - Guilty - Fear	- Regressive behaviors - Specific questioning – looking for details - Acts as if the death never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	- 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	- 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	- Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes - Shock - Sad - Anger - Confused - Lonely - Vulnerable - Fear - Worried - Guilty - Isolated - Abandoned - Anxious	- 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	- 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)	- 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	- Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief - Shock - Sad - Anger - Confused - Lonely - Vulnerable - Fear - Worried - Guilty - Isolated - Abandoned - Anxious	- 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	- 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

