

## Early Childhood and Preschool (Infant – 5 years) When Illness or Death Happens in a Family

*Infants, toddlers and preschoolers have little or no way to tell us what they are thinking and feeling. They show their feelings in other ways and the adults around them must be aware of the signs so they can respond to their unique needs.*

### What they may be FEELING

- They may miss or want the smell, sound, sight or feel of the person they are separated from.
- When their surroundings or routine change they can feel stress or anxiety.
- They may feel sad and show this through crying. You may find that they cry over something unrelated to the illness or death.
- They may withdraw as a response to all the changes.
- They may be angry. They may get upset easier perhaps about things that didn't bother them before.
- They may be scared. They may ask more questions and want more reassurance about who is caring for them and when things are happening.
- They may initially react with strong emotions and then, at times, act as though the death or illness never happened.

### What they may be THINKING

- They will be aware of any separation or absence of a caregiver or someone they have regular interaction with.
- They will also respond and react to any changes in their routine. For example, who takes care of them, when or where they eat and sleep.
- They will be affected by the emotions and responses of those around them, especially in the home.
- They may have magical thinking. For example, if you wish something it can happen.
- They have a limited understanding of illness and death. For example, dead is like sleeping or being on a trip.
- They will not understand that death is final and forever.
- They may think that dead people still do things like eat, drink or come back to life.

### How they may be BEHAVING

- Increased crying or acting out behaviors due to the stress and changes that are happening.
- Sleeplessness or nightmares and waking up. It may be more difficult for them to fall asleep and this may be due to stress and changes in their bedtime routine.
- Physical complaints – For example, stomach aches, vomiting or headaches.
- Increased need for comfort or soothing so they can feel safe and secure. For example rocking, sucking, holding, etc...
- Increased irritability and getting upset at things that never bothered them before.
- If there is a new caregiver in their life they may adapt to that person or persons in the absence of the person who is sick or has died.
- They will often express their feelings and understanding of the illness or loss through their play. For example, using dolls/puppets to play the role of doctor, sick person, or family interactions that represent some aspect of their experience.

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### **How you can help**

- Be patient. Their needs increase during this time. You may feel overwhelmed, especially if they are crying more and not easily soothed.
- Other loving adults may be needed to help care for your child. This could be more than one person and consistency is important.
- Make sure they are sleeping and eating enough.
- They may need to be held, cuddled, or rocked more.
- They may regress in their behavior. For comfort they may return to using a pacifier, suck their thumb, or carry with them a special stuffed animal or blanket.
- Keep or establish a routine for them and a consistent environment where they feel safe and comfortable.
- Give choices about visits to the hospital or bedside. Let them visit and spend time with the sick person and bring them to family gatherings/funerals if they want to participate.
- Give them simple and truthful answers to questions. You may need to repeat information because they may ask the same questions.
- Talk to them so they can understand information about the illness or death.
- Your religious and spiritual beliefs may help provide comfort or explain the illness or death.

### **When to Get Help**

- When there are concerns with eating and sleeping that begin to affect their health.
- When they become extremely withdrawn or aggressive and this affects their ability to function at home and/or school.
- When they say anything or do anything to harm themselves or someone else.
- When they ask or feel they need someone (counselor) to talk to about their experience.
- When death or illness happens it is a normal and healthy response to seek counseling. You don't need to wait for something to happen before you get additional help for yourself and your children.

### **Where to Get Help/Resources**

- For any health related concerns, contact your pediatrician or doctor.
- In any emergency call 911 or go to your local emergency room.
- For counseling and resources related to long term illness or grief and loss call Pathways Hospice at 970-663-3500.
- For counseling in the community specific to an illness talk to your hospital counselor or social worker for local community resources.
- United Way 211 has a list of community resources by topic. Dial 211 from your phone to contact them or search on line at [www.211colorado.org](http://www.211colorado.org).
- To search for a local counselor in your area go to [www.healthinfosource.com](http://www.healthinfosource.com).
- Contact your health insurance or EAP (Employee Assistance Program) through your Human Resources Department at work to find out about benefits for counseling services for you and your family.