

Children Who Experience the Death of a Loved One

Explaining Death to Children

When talking to children about death it is important to give them accurate and clear information that is appropriate to their age of understanding. Use the words death and dying to explain what happened. Children need to connect the correct word with the event, using terms like deceased or passed away is confusing to children. Explanations such as "grandma went to sleep," may cause a child to fear sleeping.

It is helpful to talk about four concepts that explain death:

- ❖ Death is permanent. "Dead people do not return to life."
- ❖ All living things will die someday. Talk about a personal experience if appropriate, like the death of a pet.
- ❖ When someone dies their body stops working. Include the idea of breathing stops and heart stops beating. "Dead people don't eat or feel anything."
- ❖ Talk to them about what causes death (a car accident or cancer). When talking about an illness, describe it as a "serious illness," to dispel any fear they may have of dying the next time they are sick.

Young children are curious about death and require concrete answers for their questions. They may ask the same questions many times. Answer their questions as they come up, simply and honestly.

Including Children in Memorial Services and Funerals

- ❖ Talk to children about the reasons we have funerals and memorial services. "A funeral is a special way to remember grandma and for all the people who loved her to come together to remember her and talk about her."
 - ❖ Explain what takes place at these rituals and what they might expect to see. Talk about why people send flowers and sing songs. Talk to them about the purpose of a casket and if the body will be viewed.
 - ❖ Let them know that some people will be crying. Explain that they are crying because they miss grandma. Explain that you will be sad and will probably cry and it's okay for the child to cry too.
 - ❖ After you've talked to them about what to expect, ask them if they want to attend.
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- ❖ Children may want to participate in some special way by writing a letter, making a drawing, lighting a candle or bringing a flower.

Children Express Their Grief Differently Than Adults

Grief is the natural response to loss. A child who has felt love will grieve the loss or separation from that person.

- ❖ Children tend to express their grief intensely, but in short episodes. They may cry one minute and be off to play the next.
- ❖ Children may delay in showing any grief response. It's not unusual for children to begin their grieving months after the death has occurred.
- ❖ Children express their grief appropriate to their age.
- ❖ Children often re-process the death with each developmental stage. Significant life events (graduations, prom, special events) bring on a grief response, especially with the death of a parent or grandparent.

How Do Children Express Their Grief?

- ❖ Like adults, each child will show their grief in unique ways.
 - ❖ Their age and experience influence how they grieve. Children in the same family will express their grief differently.
 - ❖ It's not unusual for younger children to regress and return to behaviors from an earlier period, ex, bed wetting, thumb sucking, clinging, tantrums.
 - ❖ They have an increased need for reassurance, ex. not wanting to go to school, not wanting to leave home or be separated from parent.
 - ❖ They may express their anger by acting out at school, with siblings or with parents.
 - ❖ Children may feel self blame or guilt; believing they somehow caused the death or could have prevented it. They need to know that nothing they said or did caused the death.
 - ❖ Children may express their grief through their behaviors, thoughts, feelings or physical changes. (Sleep or eating disturbances, headaches, stomach aches.)
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**Grieving Children Have Special
Needs**

They need:

- ❖ emotional support from caring adults whom they trust
 - ❖ acceptance of a variety of grief reactions
 - ❖ opportunities to vent their feelings
 - ❖ to be included in death and mourning experiences
 - ❖ adults modeling grief response
 - ❖ assurance of love and support
 - ❖ to act like children
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