



Child Grief: What They Understand, Common Responses & Ways We Can Help

Children grieve differently than adults. They do not have the capacity to deal with intense emotions continuously like adults. Instead, children grieve in doses, alternating between times of play and intense emotions. A child's age, developmental stage, and experiences determine their understanding of death and ability to cope with the death of a loved one. As well, children often "re-grieve" the loss as they age.

The following is a guide to help you understand and prepare for likely responses to death at different developmental stages. Note that grief responses are individual and that each child's grief experience will be unique.

Infants and Toddlers

Their Understanding of Death

They experience continuous temporary absence of their loved one rather than ongoing absence because they do not understand death and its permanence.

They respond to the reactions of those around them and sense that something is wrong.

They are most affected by disruptions in routine and caregiving that take place after a death.

Common Reactions

Cry more than usual

Changes in sleep: may not fall asleep the way they did, may be more sleepy than usual

Changes in eating patterns and likes

Show stress and sometimes distress when separating from parent/caregiver

What They Need

Keep routines and physical surroundings as consistent and familiar as possible.

Offer comfort (rock, hold, sing, talk to, what they know and respond to) as much as possible.

Preschool Age

Their Understanding of Death

Like toddlers preschoolers do not understand the permanence of death, but they do realize that their loved cannot be "here". They may talk about the person coming back for a special day.

Under the age of 6- years, children's brain has not yet developed to the point that they readily understand that death is: permanent (death is forever), universal (we will all die someday), non-functional (we cannot breathe, feel heat or cold, or talk when we are dead), and there is a reason for the death (causality).

Magical thinking may lead children to believe that something they said or thought caused the death "I didn't put my toys away and she was angry, that's why she *died*".

Common Reactions

May forget the person died and feel terribly sad when they remember

Repeatedly ask questions related to the death

Physical symptoms may appear (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, injured foot)

Fear that others may die too, more clingy, and reluctant to separate from parent/caregivers

Regression in behaviour (e.g., baby-talk, thumb-suck, bedwetting)

Changes in sleep (e.g., bad dreams, difficulty going to sleep, afraid to be alone in the dark)

What They Need

- Take the time for their important questions. Repeat the facts in simple and honest language.
- Explain death in concrete terms “*someone who is dead can’t breathe, feel hungry or cold*”.
- Maintain or create schedules and routines as they provide a sense of safety and control.
- Encourage children to share how they feel. Give them your full attention and ask questions.
- Offer comfort and affection, quiet times, and “just us” time.
- Reassure them about their future and safety.

Ages 6-8

Their Understanding of Death

- They now begin to understand the permanence of death and other biological concepts (see preschool).
- They are curious about the body and its functions, at times asking what may seem like insensitive and disturbing questions. It’s a part of how they make sense of the death.

Common Reactions

- Ask questions about burial and cremation and body processes, to people who can handle it
- May experience bad dreams, difficulties in school, increased anger, and physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, etc.
- May feel responsible for or guilty about the death

What They Need

- Patience when they ask the same questions repeatedly.
- Encourage them to ask questions and share their feelings (verbally, through play, art, exercise)
- Provide concrete and honest explanations to their questions.
- Maintain or create schedules and routines as they provide a sense of safety and control.
- Offer comfort, affection, and reassurance about their safety and the death was not their fault.

Ages 9-12

- They understand death fully.
- They show interest in what happens to a person’s body and spirit after death.
- Their understanding of the universality of death brings them to wonder about the impact death has on others.

Common Reactions

- May cover up emotions and try to appear normal to fit in and not worry anyone
- May feel responsible for the death or guilty for living
- May show concern for the safety and future of other family members
- May experience bad dreams, increased anger, lack of focus and interest, challenging behaviours
- May ask themselves and others endless questions about the death

What They Need

- Honest, accurate information about the death.
- Be regularly invited to ask questions and share their feelings.
- Reassurance about their own future and the future of other family members.
- Their input to be wanted and considered in regards to remembering the person who died.
- Respect their need for privacy.
- Opportunities for physical and emotional connection with family members and significant adults in their lives.