

Children and Death - Ages 2 through Adolescence

Children and Grief - Ages 2-5

Understanding of Death:

- extremely egocentric and concrete; see death as a loss of love and protection, and as abandonment
- see death as a temporary departure or a separation; find it difficult to understand the concept of finality
- may forget the person has died
- connect death with the event(s) that precede it; in a cause-and-effect way
- see some distinction between life and death; associate life with movement and death with lack of movement; may confuse death with sleep
- may attribute life to inanimate, moving objects

Common Reactions

- feeling abandoned, overwhelmed, and lonely
- denial, repression of facts
- regression in behaviors
- confusion about the circumstances of the death and need to review it frequently

What Helps:

- consistent repetition of the facts
- simple explanations about whatever happen (e.g., funerals, rituals, burial, the death)
- someone to support them and answer questions at high stress times (e.g., following the death, funerals, visits to cemetery)
- accurate, honest information at their level of understanding
- discussing what the person who died can no longer do (e.g. move, breathe, eat)

- physical contact, calm/soothing tones, quiet times
- continued reassurances (e.g., about their future, about events prior to the death)
- consistent maintenance of usual routines and discipline

Children and Grief - Ages 6-8

Understanding of Death:

- conflicting beliefs about death
- confusion and misunderstanding
- both concrete and magical thinking:
- language is used and understood literally
- engage in wishful thinking ("if only")
- think of life as being linear, with a beginning and an end
- see death as a punishment (for the dead person and themselves)
- may see death as a result of old age
- personify death as monsters or the bogey man
- the concept of "life after death" is a contradiction of terms b/c death is seen as the end of life functions

Common Reactions

- ask a lot of questions, do research into the disease and death, focus on gory details
- have fears of being abandoned, of changed in their world, of more family deaths
- feel responsible for the death, for the family's future, for making family members happy
- experience nightmares, restlessness, diarrhea
- show regression in behaviors and emotions (e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking, fears)

What Helps:

- information and explanations should be accurate and literal

- explain death in terms of body functions (e.g., breathing, heart, brain)
- grant permission to decide their own level of involvement in rituals, funerals, and gatherings
- provide a support person and models for appropriate grieving
- provide information and reassurances about their grief reactions and feelings, their responsibility for the death, and their future
- encourage child to engage in concrete survival activities (e.g., chores, play, and exercise)
- provide opportunities to share their experiences with other grieving children

Children and Grief - Ages 9-12

Understanding of Death:

- become less egocentric and develop social concerns
- make transition from concrete to more abstract thinking
- understand the universality and inevitability of death, see death as removed in time from themselves
- can generalize about death and understand its magnitude
- begin to believe that it can happen to anyone and struggle with this
- see death clinically; fear it may be painful and scary
- see death as part of life - natural, universal, and permanent
- express interest in what happens to the person[s] body and spirit after death, fear nonexistence and separation

Common Reactions:

- anxiety and general fearfulness
- covering up emotions and trying to appear normal
- concern about other survivors
- concern about personal future and security
- regressive behaviors (bedwetting, nightmares, acting out)
- withdrawal or endless questions about the death

What Helps:

- honest and accurate information about the death
- opportunities to ask their own questions
- reassurance about their future (e.g., if the other person died who would care for then and how)
- adults to model appropriate grieving
- respect for the privacy of their thoughts, feelings, and writings
- inclusion, as wished, in adult activities associated with the death (ritual, funeral, discussions, plans)

Children and Grief - Ages 13-17

Understanding of Death:

- intellectually able to understand implications of death as an adult would
- feel shocked that it could happened to their family and confused about how to react
- feel overwhelmed by intensity of the emotions
- feel a sense of isolation and loneliness even among friends and family, feel different
- vacillate between acting like an adult and a child

Common Reactions:

- withdrawal, difficulty in finding a balance
- guilt about things said or not said, done or not done
- fear or disgust of the body
- tendency to remember only good things about the person
- tendency to blame others for the death and how it affects their life
- totally empty feeling and exhaustion
- may not cry
- difficulty with eating or sleeping

What Helps:

- honest and accurate information about the death and its circumstances
- support from friends and teachers, as well as family
- inclusion in discussions and decision making, as wished
- opportunities to spend more time alone
- balance between having time to be a child and time to take on some adult responsibilities
- keeping a journal or diary