



Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- Emotional shock and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- Regressive (immature) behaviors, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- Explosive emotions and acting out behavior that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- Asking the same questions over and over, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones.

Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.

- Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences.
- Grieving is a process, not an event: Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.
- Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event: Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth.



- Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death: Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way: We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need.
- Children will need long-lasting support: The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support.
- Keep in mind that grief work is hard: It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- Be aware of your own need to grieve: Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how adolescents experience and deal with death. Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

Source: National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814, 301-657-0270, www.nasponline.org