

SUPPORTING GRIEVING KIDS

Kids' understanding of death and their expressions of grief vary at different developmental levels

Child's Understanding



- No understanding of death
- Sense disruption in their world
- Notice caregivers behaving differently or different caregivers



- See loss as temporary
- May feel have "magical" power to wish person back
- May blame self for the death
- Very literal, don't understand metaphors



- Death is real, but won't happen to them
- Death may be viewed as a person or spirit
- May be preoccupied by "morbid" details
- Usually able to understand finality of death



- Understand loss as permanent and irreversible
- May question own mortality
- May blame self for the death
- May be concerned with what happens after a person dies



- Full understanding of death; beginning to grapple with it spiritually
- Possible survivor's guilt
- Often try to make meaning out of the loss

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Frequently Observed Behavior



- Sleep disturbances such as night waking or refusing to nap
- Not eating well
- Irritability of excessive crying
- Increased separation anxiety
- Increased need to be held



- Grieves in small increments
- Gaining verbal skills; hard to communicate feelings and thoughts
- Regression is normal (bed wetting, sleep patterns)
- Use play to work through grief



- May develop fears: separation, darkness, nightmares, etc
- Regression still common
- Coping through information gathering
- May see changes in behavior with aggression or being withdrawn



- Feelings may be expressed or held in-often "seem" to be doing well
- May develop "mask" or uncaring or joking
- Regression still common
- May take on role of the person who died
- May see changes in behavior, mood, friendships



- Can test their own mortality with increased risk-taking behaviors
- Depression and regression common
- Feel life is "unfair" and may act out, be withdrawn or express anger
- Focused on relationships outside of the family
- Strive for independence, yet fragile

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How to Help and Support



- **Provide extra comfort: holding, rocking, eye contact, talking in a soothing voice**
- **Offer a transitional object, such as a blanket or stuffed animal**



- **Answer questions honestly using simple, concrete language**
- **"The body stopped working" is a helpful first definition of death. Be clear that dying is not the same as sleeping**
- **Be patient with repeated questions--they need repeated explanations**
- **Help label feelings**
- **Consistent routines and reassurances that they will be cared for**



- **Follow their lead and allow them to talk or not when needed**
- **Answer their questions honestly and concretely... information gives them a sense of control**
- **Reflect back feelings and provide words to identify emotions**
- **Provide expressive and physical activities**
- **Consistent routines and schedules provide comfort**
- **Communicate with the school**



- **Respect their feelings and support their coping style**
- **Be available to address concerns they may have on how the death affects their life**
- **Don't ask the child to be brave, strong in control, or responsible for taking care of others**
- **Answer "I don't know, what do you think?" when you don't have answers**
- **Give opportunities for choices to provide a sense of autonomy and control**



- **Be available and let them know you are there when they need you**
- **Validate their feelings and be open to discussion the "why" questions about life and death**
- **Be supportive and tolerant of behavior as long as it doesn't hurt themselves or others**
- **Respect adolescents need to work through grief independently and be with friends**
- **Encourage expressive outlets to channel strong emotions**