SUPPORTING GRIEVING KIDS

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

**Child's Understanding**

- **At 0-2 years old**
  - No understanding of death
  - Sense of disruption in their world
  - Notice caregivers behaving differently or different caregivers

- **At 2-4 years old**
  - 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

- **At 5-7 years old**
  - 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

- **At 7-11 years old**
  - 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

- **At 12+ years old**
  - 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**

- **at 0-2 years old**
  - 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

- **at 2-4 years old**
  - 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

- **at 5-7 years old**
  - May develop fears: separation, darkness, nightmares, etc
  - Regression still common
  - Coping through information gathering
  - May see changes in behavior with aggression or being withdrawn

- **at 7-11 years old**
  - 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

- **at 12+ years old**
  - 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  - Feel life is “unfair” and may act out, be withdrawn or express anger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

at 0–2 years old

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

at 2–4 years old

- 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

at 5–7 years old

- 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

at 7–11 years old

- 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

at 12+ years old

- 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