



SUPPORTING A CHILD THROUGH THE BEREAVEMENT PROCESS



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GRIEF AND DEATH: HELPING KIDS COPE

Dealing with the death of a family member can be one of the most difficult events to face. Even more difficult, is how to tell your children about a death. It is important to explain these difficult events to children in order to help them cope effectively and minimize some feelings of guilt, fear or anxiety. Adults often feel that children are too young to be told about death and try to protect them, however children often know more about death than we think. Children are exposed to death through the loss of a pet, through video games, through TV shows, etc. It is best to be open and honest about death - if parents don't give the right information, children could have misconceptions about death.

TIPS FOR PARENTS OR CAREGIVERS

Children grieve in ways that are similar and different from adults, and as children grow older, their understanding of death changes. Parents need to recognize that each child has his/her own way of working through grief, and there is no wrong way to react when someone dies. Some children may cry, accept it right away and want to be near caregivers. Some children may ease into it slowly by talking and asking questions. Other children may appear unconcerned until something triggers their emotions. You could see your child react with guilt, fear, anger or denial. Feelings may be shown in your child's behavior, and these behaviors could include withdrawal, regression, clinging or acting out. It is very important to provide your child with support and love as they deal with the death. Please see [age specific handouts \(on the following pages\)](#) to best support your child during this difficult time.

HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD

A child can overhear conversations and can read emotions/body language, so it is best to be honest when talking to your child. If you do not give your child the right, honest information, he/she could become worried that they caused you to be sad. If you do not have an answer to a child's question, it is okay to say "I do not know". When a child sees you cry, it lets them know that it is okay to have feelings and let your emotions out, so don't be afraid to cry in front of them. It is very important that you do not "make up" ways to explain death (such as sleeping/resting or taking a trip) because this will



only cause more confusion for the child which could cause them to become afraid of these explanations (not wanting to take a nap or not wanting to take a trip). It is best to use simple and concrete terms when talking. You can explain death as when someone dies, they do not play, walk, breathe, feel, sleep or eat, etc. Please see [age specific handouts \(on the following pages\)](#) to help you explain further.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

It is important to tell your children your beliefs. It is best to explain death first, then offer your religious beliefs after, this will help to avoid further confusion. Try not to tell your child “He was so special that God wanted him in Heaven with him”. If siblings or other children hear this, they may think that they were not special enough for God, or they could fear that God will take them soon as well.

FUNERALS

Children need to be allowed to be a part of death rituals, such as funerals, because it gives them the opportunity to say goodbye. Give children the choice of attending or being a part of the ceremony. If the child doesn't wish to attend the ceremony, honor his/her wishes and try to involve them in other ways - writing a letter, recording a video, creating artwork, sending pictures to the ceremony. Other ways a child can say goodbye is by participating in memorial activities such as planting a tree/flower, releasing balloons, making a memory book. If you feel that your child needs additional support, remember that it is okay to seek additional help.

LOCAL RESOURCE CENTERS TO HELP YOUR CHILD

Annie's Hope: The Bereavement Center for Kids

Phone: (314)965-5015

Email: annieshopekids@aol.com

<http://www.annieshope.org/>

The Kids' Clubhouse

Phone: (314)721-1144

email: lisamo2323@yahoo.com

<http://www.kidsclubhouse.org/index.html>





Grief and Death: Helping your Infant/Toddler (Birth to 3)

- While this age has no understanding of death, infants and toddlers can sense something is wrong and could react to your emotions as well as separation. They may miss the feel, smell, sight or sound of the loved one.
- **Possible related behaviors:** clinging, crying, fussiness, sleeping issues, irritability, anxiety, biting, throwing, hitting.
- **What you can do to help:** Keep the child's routine as consistent as possible. Provide comfort (hugging, holding, cuddling, patting). Spend time with your child to keep the feeling of security. If you need to be away from the child, have a familiar caregiver be present while you are away.
- **How to explain death:** Children ages 2 – 3 can be talked to about death, however it should be a short explanation/conversation. It is best to explain with words such as “dead” or “dying”, and avoid using the words “gone”, “gone to sleep” or “taken away”, as this can confuse the child and lead to other fears. If your child sees you crying you can explain “I am crying because Sammy died, and I miss her, but I am happy you are here with me.”



Grief and Death: Helping your Preschooler (3 - 5)

- Your child sees death as temporary and they may believe that the loved one will return. Death can be confused with sleeping, so it is very important to avoid the words “gone to sleep” or “just sleeping” when explaining death. Your child can see death as their fault and/or think that they can “catch” death. Your child could start connecting events that are false (example: because you have cancer you will die).
- **Possible related behaviors:** Your child could show little to no concern at times. You may see regressive behaviors such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or fear of the dark. You could see separation anxiety, especially at night and when leaving for school. Your child may need to talk about the death frequently – this helps children remember that it happened and creates an understanding of permanency (Your child could say something like “Sissy doesn’t need shoes, she is dead” and while this may be very hard to hear or seem inappropriate, it is helping them to understand). You may notice your child participating in seemingly odd behaviors such as “playing dead” - this is normal and your child is just processing what is going on.
- **What you can do to help:** Respond to your child’s needs – give them support and love. When your child asks questions, answer them simply and appropriately. Keep the child’s routine as consistent as possible. If you need to be away from the child, have a familiar caregiver be present while you are away. If this child wants to attend rituals, prepare them for it (a lot of people crying, hugging, talking about the loved one).
- **What you can say:** Give brief explanations and use terms such as “death” and “died”. Use physical functions when explaining, rather than going into detail of the illness – for example “Now that Billy has died, his body has stopped working. He can’t walk, talk, play, run, eat or sleep anymore”. You can also say “Billy was very sick. The doctors tried everything they could to make him better, but his body could not work. His body stopped working and he died”.



Grief and Death: Helping your School Ager (6 - 12)

- A school-age child can understand death, however they may still have a lot of questions. A younger school-aged child may ask many questions and even think the loved one may come back. Your child may show more interest in exactly what happened inside the body. Your child can still think that their actions, thoughts or words could have caused the death. A school-aged child may think that he or she can “catch” death. It is very important to explain what happened and why in simple terms.
- **Possible related behaviors:** You may see a school-age child express their emotions more. You may see your child cry, have anxiety, be angry, deny death, daydream, fear losing more loved ones around them, try to fix things or find a solution. You could see your child having headaches or body pains often. A school-age child could act out more with friends and peers. You could see your child let their grades slip. Your child could feel guilty or angry. For example, your child could think their sibling died because they were jealous of them, or your child may be angry that he/she or you couldn't prevent the loved one from dying.
- **What you can do to help:** Explain that everyone has different reactions to death and these reactions can change at any time. If your child has new feelings, help them to understand these feelings. Answer all of your child's questions open and honestly. Help by listening, providing information and offering ways to help express emotions. Give your child permission to cry or show emotions. When asked about how the loved one died, give open and honest, simple explanations. You can encourage your child to participate in any rituals such as the funeral. To help, you can develop a memory book or choose an item to be buried with the loved one. Closure is a very important part of the grieving process for this age. Some ways your child can say goodbye is to let balloons go, plant a tree or flower, write letters or poems. If you feel that your child needs additional support, remember that it is okay to seek additional help.
- **What you can say:** Your child needs an honest explanation. You do not need to give them more information than they can handle, however when/if they ask detailed questions, they need to be answered. If the child asks specific questions about the loved one's body, answer them honestly. For example “Why did Zac's brain swell?.....Zac's brain swelled because he was in a car accident and hit his head very hard”. Avoid euphemisms such as “passed away” “sleeping” and “gone away”.



Grief and Death: Helping your Adolescent (12 - 18)

- An adolescent understands that death is not only irreversible, but that death will eventually happen to everyone. Even though an adolescent has more of an adult-like understanding of death, you will see their behavior alternate from adult-like to child-like. This age can be self-centered and feel responsible for death. An adolescent can take on adult concerns and roles (financial issues, cooking/cleaning, childcare). An adolescent may be uncomfortable with death because it causes them to be more dependent on family in a time that they are striving for attention. It is normal for an adolescent to hide his/her feelings for fear of not “being cool”.
- **Possible related behaviors:** Your child could show signs of grief emotionally, socially and physically. You could see: a difference in sleeping patterns, less participation with peers, a change in eating patterns, a change in interest of school and responsibilities, questioning of religious beliefs, extreme anger. An adolescent could deny death by engaging in risky behaviors. They could have an obsession with death. It is normal to see an adolescent be sad one moment then happy the very next moment.
- **What you can do to help:** Encourage communication with the family but also encourage communication with a trusted friend or counselor. If you feel that your child needs additional support, remember that it is okay to seek additional help. It is important to be honest in your own grieving while being able to talk about death and feelings with an adolescent. Be patient while recognizing that an adolescents thoughts and feelings can change rapidly and be inconsistent. Adolescents may keep to themselves for fear of causing parents more stress. Allow adolescents time to balance responsibilities with their free time as well as time to participate in extracurricular activities with peers. If the death was not his/her fault, help your child to understand that they were not responsible for the death. Validate your child’s feelings while helping them understand the death. Support your teen and let them know that you do not expect them to take on responsibilities of the loved one. Remember to support your adolescent’s style of coping as they have new feelings. Help your teen to understand their feelings by listening and being encouraging.
- **What you can say:** Be honest and open when talking to an adolescent about death. Don't be afraid of silence if your teen is not ready or able to talk. Provide comfort and care by just being there. Rather than tell them how they should or should not feel, confirm their feelings and offer understanding for the difficult emotions involved with grief.



20 Ways to Remember Someone You Love

- Listen to their favorite song
- Make a journal/scrapbook about them
- Create a site on social media to remember them
- Talk with friends/family about good times that you shared
- Put photos of them in a special place so you can see them often
- Plant a special garden/tree/flowers in memory of him/her
- Create a memory box with all of their favorite things
- Make a piece of jewelry in memory of them and wear it every day
- Light a candle and take time to think about special memories
- Do a random act of kindness in their name
- Participate in a remembrance walk
- Name a star after them
- Have a balloon release in their name
- Watch their favorite movie
- Make a quilt or teddy bear out of their favorite clothes
- Celebrate special occasions (birthdays, holidays, anniversaries)
- Join a support group with other bereaved members
- Volunteer at a place that was important to him/her
- Make a memory collage from old photos
- Set aside some quality time to take care of yourself