

## **Developmental Issues of Grieving Children And How To Help**

### **Infant and Toddler:**

- can read facial expressions and sense the emotions of people around him/her
- senses rather than understands that something has happened
- expresses grief through behaviors and play rather than words

#### **What to expect:**

- general anxiety
- crying
- sleeplessness or extensive sleeping
- eating problems
- needing to be held
- separation anxiety
- regression
- irritability and temper tantrums

#### **What to do:**

- provide lots of physical contact and nurturing
- provide a consistent routine
- provide concrete rules and limits
- explain very simply and truthfully what has happened
- make time for play

### **Preschooler:**

- believes death is reversible, cannot understand “forever”
- experiences death as abandonment
- “magical thinking” may cause child to believe he/she caused death or can bring the dead person back
- intense but brief grief responses
- will ask repeatedly about the death
- will express grief through play rather than words
- may regress to earlier stages

#### **What to expect:**

- changes in eating and sleeping
- regression (thumb-sucking, wanting help with feeding and dressing, baby talk, bed-wetting)
- confusion
- irritability
- worries about safety and being abandoned, that others will die

***What to do:***

- give simple, concrete explanations
- repeat as often as asked
- include child in funeral or memorial ritual
- encourage play
- accept expressions of anger
- be consistent in routines
- allow regression
- provide lots of physical closeness and nurturing
- read story books about death and loss

**Elementary School Age Child:**

- has lots of questions about how life will be different, how the person died, what happened to the body, etc.
- may express wish to be with the dead person
- beginning to understand death is permanent
- may worry about own death and death of others
- may feel guilty about the death
- difficulty staying focused in school and completing assignments
- trouble sleeping, nightmares

***What to expect:***

- regression
- fighting, anger
- trouble paying attention, daydreaming
- withdrawn
- sleepiness
- trouble completing school assignments

***What to do:***

- be truthful, clear, accurate with explanations
- encourage expression through art, journaling, music
- encourage physical activities
- maintain routines and structure but be flexible
- encourage expression of feelings

**Middle School Age Child:**

- already experiencing physical and hormonal changes
- physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping problems, eating changes)
- range of emotions
- does not want to be treated differently
- more verbal but still needs physical outlets
- understand death as final and unavoidable
- may increase risk-taking behaviors
- feels helpless and hopeless

### **What to expect:**

- arguments, anger, fighting
- withdrawal
- inability to concentrate
- risk-taking behavior such as stealing, using drugs, premature sex
- moodiness and inconsistent reactions

### **What to do:**

- accept mood swings
- be supportive and encourage sharing
- accept increase in physical concerns
- encourage support from a number of sources including group support
- listen and don't be afraid to model healthy grieving

### **High School Adolescent:**

- adult understanding of death, that death is universal, inevitable, irreversible
- yet believes death won't happen to him/her
- depression, denial, anger
- risk-taking and acting out behaviors indicate challenging death
- fights against needing help because he/she wants to be independent
- death is romanticized—not really in touch with the finality of death

### **What to expect:**

- withdrawal from parent and other adults
- anger
- increased risk-taking
- pushing limits
- lack of concentration
- increased time with friends
- sadness

### **What to do:**

- listen
- encourage expression of feeling
- be truthful and factual in explanations
- model appropriate grieving responses
- be flexible

Above information was taken from:

*Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers* from the Doughy Center  
*Helping Children Cope with Death* from the Doughy Center  
*How Do We Tell the Children?* by Dan Schaeffer and Christine Lyons  
*The Grieving Child* by Helen Fitzgerald