

Caregiver Guidelines for Supporting Children during Times of Grief

You may not have one perfect response to grief, indeed there may not even be one perfect response. You can listen carefully and offer children an opportunity to express their feelings.

Ways to Help:

- Be patient and compassionate – the grieving process is sporadic and occurs over time.
- Listen
- Observe changes in behavior
- Continue to provide limits for behavior, be firm yet gentle
- Be honest, but do not give unnecessary details
- Talk about feelings associated with grief. There is not one “correct” response when feeling grief.

Needs of the Grieving Child:

- To be allowed to grieve
- To have their loss acknowledged and validated
- To have accurate information about the event
- Careful listening
- Provide support for overwhelming feelings
- Continuation of routine activities (getting rest, eating well, exercise or summer activities your child would ordinarily do)
- Opportunities to remember

Understanding the Grief Cycle:

Children grieve sporadically. Every child’s grief experience is unique to the individual. It is not so much a forward progression through the grief cycle, but a working through grief. These are some common experiences:

- shock and denial
- protest and strong emotions
- disorientation
- deep sadness (hopelessness, fear of failure, aimlessness, irritability)
- acceptance
- adjustment

Typical Responses to loss from Younger Children:

How children react will depend on the relationship they had with the person who died, their age, and their prior experience with death. Preschool age children do not understand that death is final and may confuse death with sleep or someone taking a trip. They may show greater interest in things that are dead. As children reach elementary age, they do begin to understand that death is final and this concept often creates more fear and sadness. Children in both age groups typically have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally as they either do not have the ability to do so or find that talking about death is too anxiety provoking. Children will often display their feelings in their behavior and play, so it is important to be more watchful of how they act and what they do rather than what they say.

Typical Responses to Loss from Adolescents:

As children get older, their responses begin to resemble adult reactions to trauma but may also have a combination of some more childlike reactions mixed with adult responses. Their own personal histories with loss will contribute to their reactions. Most adolescents know that death is final and universal. While they are more knowledgeable that life is fragile, they tend to believe that they are immortal and invincible which can lead to risk-taking behavior. Adolescents may blame themselves. Teens may romanticize death and fantasize about their own death and reaction of others. They may not show their feelings for fear of appearing weak or needing to appear in control of their feelings.

Some responses/feelings across both ages may include:

- physical complaints
- separation anxiety (i.e., wanting to be close to Parents or other loved ones more often/fear of being alone)
- behaving impulsively
- crankiness or irritability
- arguing, screaming, fighting
- acting like it never happened
- confusion about why the person/people died
- inaccurately blame themselves or others
- poor concentration
- aggressiveness
- withdrawal
- sleep disturbance and/or nightmares
- appetite increase or decrease
- decreases in energy level
- shock indifference
- depression
- feelings of vulnerability and anxiety (maybe this could happen to me or someone else that I care about)
- anxiety
- loneliness
- anger
- sadness
- abandonment
- guilt
- fearfulness
- worry
- isolation

Some other thoughts to consider:

It is important for you as a parent to recognize your own needs and feelings, obtain support when you need it from other adults and to take good care of yourself. If you have particular concerns about your child and their ability to cope right now, please let school staff know.

