

HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH DEATH

DON'T

1. Attempt to hide your feelings.
2. Fail to recognize behavior problems may be transferred emotions.
3. Tell half truths and fairy tales.
4. Provide a theological lecture (preach).
5. Imply a temporary situation (He has gone away; she is sleeping).
6. Blame God (It is God's will... What, god would destroy a person?).
7. Leave explanations incomplete (He was sick... So am I: will I die?).

DO

1. Share your own feelings.
Encourage tears.
Respond to the child's feelings.
Allow time for mourning (can be months).
2. Recognize the stages in the grief process and accept that children also go through these stages.
3. Be honest at all times.
When explaining, identify with something familiar to the child.
Answer the child's questions candidly and rationally.
4. Allow the child to become involved.
Look for the child's needs and fulfill these needs if possible.
Allow the child to help fulfill the needs of the surrounding adults.
5. Discuss death with your children.
Explain in advance about funeral rituals.
Discuss the funeral service (mortuary, church, graveside).
Listen to what your child has to say.

*Brenda L. Scheatzle, M.C.
National Certified Counselor
Comprehensive Psychological Services*

The Robertson Bereavement Center
A Community Outreach Of

Hospice of Medina County
797 North Court St., Medina, OH
330-725-1900 or 1-800-700-4771



Barberton Hospice & Palliative Care
103 Fifth St., Suite S, Barberton, OH
330-861-0400 or 1-877-723-5755

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SIGNS WHEN BEREAVEMENT IN CHILDREN NEEDS OUTSIDE INTERVENTION

- If a child pretends absolutely nothing has happened.
- If school work takes a dramatic decline or the child develops a phobic fear of school.
- If news of a death or other significant loss was kept from the child for a long time or if the child was told lies about the death.
- If a child threatens suicide.
- If a child panics frequently.
- If a child frequently physically assaults others or is cruel to animals.
- If a child had a difficult relationship with the deceased or behaves poorly with the family members.
- If the child becomes involved with drugs or alcohol.
- If the child begins committing serious socially delinquent acts.
- If the child is unwilling or unable to socialize with other children.

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WHAT CAN ADULTS DO TO HELP THEIR CHILD IN DEALING WITH DEATH?

1. As soon as possible after the death, set aside time to gently, yet truthfully, tell the child about it. Choosing a familiar room or outdoor setting to talk may help the child feel more comfortable.
2. Be truthful. Do not make up stories that will have to be changed later. Do not use euphemisms like "expired," "lost," or "passed away." If no one will answer a child's questions, he or she may imagine the person's death to be far more terrifying than it was. Even the knowledge that the person died as a result of a homicide, suicide, or violent accident is usually best shared with the child.
3. Do not burden the child with information he or she is not ready for. Children need a logical explanation of why a person died, but they may not want all of the details for days or weeks afterwards. Be sensitive to what information the child is asking for.
4. All children react differently. Withdrawal, aggressiveness, panic, anger, guilt and fear are all signs of grief. Be patient and understanding.
5. Acknowledge the reality that grief hurts. Do not attempt to rescue your child from that hurt; it is normal and necessary. Be supportive and available.
6. Talk about death as a natural part of the life cycle. The last thing we do in life is die. Discuss with the whole family.
7. Assure your child that he/she is in no way responsible for the death. Nothing they did, or didn't do, caused the person to die.
8. Assure your child that not everyone with a serious illness dies. Explore feelings about death, loss and grief through books. Hug each other.
9. Encourage the child to express feelings. Share your own feelings. Don't be afraid to cry in a child's presence. Cry together; hold each other.

10. Take the children to the funeral. Let them observe others mourning. Older children may feel useful by comforting an adult with a hug or holding a hand, helping with visitors, serving dinners, and being included in some decisions about the funeral.
11. If the person is to be buried, it will be helpful for the children to be present so they will know where the body is and where they may return to visit.
12. Let the children tell others about the death if they wish. The subject should be as open and comfortable as possible, rather than something that is hidden.
13. In the weeks and months following the death, talk about the missing person. Casually mention things the person said or did. Recall funny stories, happy and unhappy incidents together. Encourage the child to talk about the things he or she remembers.
14. Let the child know you will try to answer any question. It is okay not to know the answer, but be honest. Show that you believe anger, sorrow, loneliness, and fear are all right to feel, and that you will be glad to talk about each concern as it arises.
15. When we share difficult feelings people try to be helpful by saying "You shouldn't feel that way." What we need is to have our emotions accepted. Examples of accepting the child's feelings are: "You're really feeling angry that Susie has a mommy and you don't: or "it seems like you're scared that your Daddy might die, too." Most of all just be yourself. Accept and talk about what you are feeling, and your children will be encouraged, by your example, to do the same. Through sharing grief, your family's closeness may increase to a depth never imagined. Often through crisis comes growth.

Source: When My Mommy Died: A Child's View of Death – Janice Hammond, Ph.D.

CHILDREN'S CONCEPT OF DEATH BY AGE

At some point, children will face the complicated task of trying to understand a loss. As adults, our ideas about death change as we add to our life experiences. Children are just beginning this complex journey. We can help children learn appropriate responses by being open and available and by our own example. Children perceive death differently at different stages of their development.

- **Under 3 Years Old:** Even very young children are sensitive to the changes a loss can bring about. They notice increased levels of anxiety and sadness in their caregivers. New people may suddenly be in the home and the child's routine is disrupted. While a small child will not be able to intellectually understand what death is, he or she will certainly notice the absence of a significant person as well as the reactions of those around him/her.
- **Ages 3 to 5:** The concept of "forever" is difficult for this age. They will see death as temporary, reversible, or as a restricted form of existence. Death as a separation is particularly frightening for children of this age. Children need reassurance that the emotions they are experiencing are normal, and okay. Young children frequently believe that their thoughts can cause things to happen, and they sometimes connect unrelated events in highly creative ways in an attempt to make sense of a loss. Clear, direct explanations of what happened and why are especially important for this age.
- **Ages 6 to 9:** By this age children begin to understand that death is final, but still see it as happening mostly to other people. They may perceive death as a scary creature or person that takes people away. Or they may fear that death is contagious. There is still a tendency to believe that thoughts make things happen. Clear explanations continue to be vital. Pointed curiosity about physical details is common.
- **Ages 9 to 12:** Older children have often had some experience of loss by this point, most commonly the loss of a pet. They know that death is final and comes to all living things, but they still see it as distant from themselves. Children this age will be concerned about practical things and may worry about how the loss will affect their immediate future. Interest in hearing all the "gory details" continues.
- **Adolescence:** Death is both fascinating and frightening. As teenagers struggle to forge their independent identities, death is particularly threatening. Losses may make teens feel more child-like and dependent. The loss of a parent may come at a time when the teenager has been pushing parents away as part of the normal separation process, and cause confusion and guilt. Teenagers may feel that the situation requires them to step into an adult role in response to the loss. Teenagers are uncomfortable with anything that makes them different from their peers.

Each child and adolescent is unique. These descriptions should be used as very broad guidelines.

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REACTIONS TO GRIEF

There are many emotions that grieving people experience. Some may be strange, unwelcome, or may make you feel as if you are going crazy.

Emotions may include:

- Numbness and lack of feeling
- Shock and disbelief
- Yearning for the person who died—searching for or expecting the person to return
- Panic, anxiety, tenseness
- Anger and guilt—even at the person for dying or at yourself for not having done enough
- Sadness, depression, hopelessness, despair
- Helplessness, dependency, vulnerability
- Not caring about yourself
- Irritability
- Sense of relief when the person dies after a period of illness, followed by guilt
- Loss of liveliness and spontaneity
- Isolation

Mental: In addition to these various emotional reactions, people tend to experience changes in their mental and physical conditions. Common changes include:

- Sense of unreality
- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Preoccupation with the person who died and obsessively reviewing the dying process
- Thinking about suicide
- Humorlessness
- Sense of being unconnected, of being in your own world

The physical effects people can experience include:

- Sleep problems
- Loss or change in appetite
- Fatigue, lack of energy
- Restlessness
- Stomach distress
- Heightened sensitivity to pain
- Headaches
- Crying, tearfulness
- Weight gain or loss
- Increase or decrease in sexual desire or energy

Spiritual reactions may include:

- Questioning divine will. Is this a blessing or a curse? Bondage or release? Justice or injustice?
- Difficulty trusting in self, God, pastor, rabbi, family, friends, others?
- Increase or decrease in faith; search for meaning
- Feeling connected to others or separated?
- Struggling with/searching for Creator, images of God

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Seven Ways to Guide Children Through Grief

- ❑ **Always tell the truth.** Explain what happened and why, using simple direct language. Use the correct words: people die, are dead, were killed. Be sure to provide some information on why the death happened or children may fill in any blanks with creative connections. Children without facts are more likely to blame themselves for causing or contributing to the death.
- ❑ **Let children know that the emotions they are experiencing are normal.** Grief is more than sadness. Adults and children feel anger, fear, confusion, guilt and relief, as well as sadness, when someone dies. These feelings are not good or bad. They're just normal.
- ❑ **Let children's actions as well as their words guide you to what they are feeling.** Children, especially young ones, will express a lot of their fear, anger and sadness through behavior. They may be withdrawn, hyperactive, clingy, destructive, and might feel physically sick sometimes. Many children temporarily regress to how they behaved at a younger age. Actions may be their only way to tell caregivers, "I'm mad, I'm worried, I'm scared, I'm confused, I'm hurt."
- ❑ **Help children understand the behavior of adults around them.** Children may be confused by changes in behavior and the variety of reactions they see in adults around them. Uncle John might be angry, Aunt Jane constantly tearful, and Grandpa silent and withdrawn. Young children, in particular, need to know that it is not their behavior that is causing the upset.
- ❑ **Protect children's rights to be and remain children.** Do not allow or encourage children and adolescents to step into adult roles because of the loss. Grieving children need routines, structure and discipline so their world can stay as normal as possible. Children and teens do not lose their need to socialize and have fun. They can be grieving hard one minute and playing hard the next. This does not mean they do not care. Children want to fit back in as soon as possible.
- ┌ **Allow children to participate in the rituals of saying good-bye.** Funerals are for the whole family. Children should be given the choice of whether they attend services after they have been given very clear detailed descriptions of what to expect. Smaller children should be included for short periods of time and someone should be available to answer questions and move small children on to their next activity. Children who are not allowed to go to funerals will wonder what was so horrible that they couldn't see it, or will get the message that they are not important enough, or competent enough to be included.
- ❑ **Know when to get help.** A question parents often have is, "How do I know if my child needs professional help?" Any kind of extreme behavior is an obvious red flag. These behaviors include suicide threats, serious destructive acts toward people, property or animals, frequent episodes of panic, and drug or alcohol abuse. Other changes that probably warrant evaluation are an inability or unwillingness to socialize, a significant decline in schoolwork, or continued denial (in words or behavior) that the death happened. Young people may also need assistance if they had a difficult relationship with the person who died. Sometimes there is confusion surrounding the death—misinformation, lies, or a delay in notification and this may place the young person at risk of coping poorly. A child who is feeling a sense of responsibility for the death, or events leading to the death needs individual support.

This handout was developed by Kansas City Hospice, underwritten by Prime Health Foundation.

Compliments of: Robertson Bereavement Center – a community service sponsored by Hospice of Medina County.

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HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DEATH AND LOSS

- The fundamental lesson from research by Maria Nagay, Mark Speece, Sandor Brent and others is that children do make an active effort to grasp or understand death. Nagy writes, "To conceal death from the child is not possible and is also not permissible." (Corr, p.310)
- Children's concepts of death are intimately associated with ways they feel about and interpret both themselves and the world around them. (Corr, p.314)
- Three central issues for bereaved children:
 1. Did I cause it?
 2. Is it going to happen to me?
 3. Who is going to take care of me?
- Most studies have found that by age 7 children understand each component of death
 1. universality (all-inclusive, inevitable, unpredictable)
 2. irreversibility
 3. nonfunctionality (internal & external)
 4. causality
 5. noncorporeal continuation (some type of continued life form)
- Four Tasks
 1. understand and make sense of loss
 2. express and respond
 3. commemorate loss
 4. learn to go on living
- Variables of Understanding
 1. developmental level
 2. life experiences
 3. individual personality
 4. patterns of communication and support
- Preparation
 1. education - teachable moments
 2. communication - take cues from children, answer what they want to know in their terms
 3. validation - nonjudgmental
- Helping
 1. determine child's perception
 2. understand symbolic language
 3. clarify and dispel fantasy
 4. encourage expression
 5. promote self-esteem
 6. make no assumptions/ be open

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POSSIBLE REACTIONS OF CHILDREN TO GRIEF AND LOSS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

- Student retells events of the death and funeral
- Student dwells on things he/she used to do with the deceased.
- Student is disruptive in class.
- Student says she/he cannot concentrate and therefore cannot complete work assignments.
- Student instigates fights.
- Student rejects old friends and teams up with classmate whose parent/sibling is also dead.
- Student becomes the “class clown.”
- Student is preoccupied with medical cause of loved one’s death.
- Student spends free time walking or sitting alone.
- Student, at times, appears to be unmoved by the death of deceased.
- Student may become overly sensitive and tearful.
- Student drops out of after-school activities.
- Student assumes role of dead parent.
- Student mentions talking to the deceased.
- Student relates dreams about the deceased.
- Student attempts to phone home often during school hours.
- Student is preoccupied with his/her own death

From Kathleen Kidder-Cassini and Jacqueline L. Rogers of Grief Work of Cincinnati, 1991

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