

## Death from a Child's Point of View

Children are often the forgotten grievers.

Children and adults grieve differently. Children grieve more intermittently.

Other factors such as personality traits, coping styles, family dynamics, prior mental health and life stressors, and the circumstances of the death impact how a child handles a particular death loss. Children re-grieve at each developmental stage. What may feel like a step back is part of the process.

### INFANTS/TODDLERS

#### Child's Understanding

- No understanding of death
- Sense something is disruptive in their world
- Caregivers are behaving differently or different people are taking care of them

#### Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Sleep disturbances such as frequent night waking or refusal to nap
- Not eating well
- Irritability or excessive crying
- Increased separation anxiety
- Increased need to be held or comforted

#### What Helps?

- Provide extra comfort...holding, rocking, eye contact, talking in a soft voice
- Offer a transitional object (blanket or stuffed animal)

### PRESCHOOL (AGES 2-4)

#### Child's Understanding

- See the loss as temporary and not permanent
- May feel they have the "magical" power to wish someone back
- Confusion about what is real and not real
- Very egocentric and may feel like they are at fault
- Understanding is very literal and do not understand metaphors

#### Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Grieves in small increments
- Gaining verbal skills so it's hard to communicate feelings and thoughts
- Regression is normal (bed wetting, sleeping patterns, separation anxiety)
- Using play to work through their grief and take breaks from their grief

#### What Helps?

- Answer honestly using simple, concrete language
- "The body stopped working" is a helpful first definition of death and be clear that dying is not the same as sleeping
- Be patient with repeated questions...they need repeated explanations
- Be patient with regressive behavior
- Help label feelings
- Provide extra comfort...hugs, sitting still and listening
- Consistent routines and reassurance that they will be cared for

## **SCHOOL AGE (AGES 5-7)**

### Child's Understanding

- Death is real but won't happen to them
- Usually able to understand death is final
- Death may be viewed as an actual person, spirit, or being
- Some will develop a preoccupation with "morbid" details

### Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Many develop fears (separation, darkness, nightmares, etc.)
- Feeling may be shared or held in
- Coping through the gathering of information
- Regression may occur
- May see changes in behavior with aggression or being withdrawn

### What Helps?

- Follow their lead...allow them to talk or not talk when needed
- Answer their questions honestly and concretely...information gives them a sense of control
- Reflect back feelings and give them words to identify their feelings
- Provide expressive and physical activities to release energy
- Consistent routines and schedule provide comforting structure
- Communicate with the school

## **SCHOOL AGE (AGES 7-11)**

### Child's Understanding

- Understands death as permanent and irreversible
- May question their own mortality
- May be concerned about what happens after a person dies

### Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Feelings may be expressed or held in...often "seem" to be doing well
- May develop a "mask" of uncaring or joking
- Regression still common
- Relationships with friends becoming more important
- May take on the role of the person who died
- May see changes in behavior, mood, grades, and relationships

### What Helps?

- Respect their feelings and support their style of coping
- Be available and address concerns they may have on how the death has affected their life
- Do not ask the child to be brave, strong, in control, or responsible for taking care of others
- Answering "I don't know...what do you think?" when you don't have the answers
- Provide expressive and physical activities to release energy
- Give opportunities for choices to provide a sense of control
- Continue consistent routines and communication with school

## **ADOLESCENTS (AGES 12+)**

### Child's Understanding

- Full awareness of death but only beginning to grapple with it spiritually
- Possible survivor guilt
- Often try to make meaning out of the loss

### Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Can test their own mortality with increased risk-taking behaviors
- Depression and regression common
- Feel that life is unfair and can act out, withdraw, express anger
- Focus on relationships outside the family
- Striving for independence yet often fragile inside

### What Helps?

- Be available and let them know you are there if they need you
- Validate their feelings and be open to discussing all the "why" questions about life and death
- Be supportive and tolerant of behavior as long as it is not harmful to themselves or others
- Respect adolescents need to work through grief independently and their reliance on friends
- Encourage expressive outlets to channel strong emotions and search for meaning