

Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth-2 years	- No understanding of death - Child does not have words for feelings - Aware of the absence of loved one - Notifies changes in routine - Notifies changes in family emotions	- Longing - Mixed content, sounds, smell and sight of loved one - Fears of being abandoned - Anxiety	- Crying - Screaming - Indigestion - Thumping - Rocking - Threading - Staking, biting - Sleeplessness	- Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance - Maintain routines - Meet immediate physical needs - Include the child in the mourning process when possible - Be gentle & patient
3-4 years	- No understanding of permanence of death - To be dead is to be sleeping or in a trip - May wonder what deceased is doing - Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible - May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies - Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than reality	- Fear - Sadness - Insecurity - Confusion - Anger - Inhibits - Agitated - Worried - Guilt	- Regressive behaviors - Repetitive questions - Withdrawal - Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings - Interested in dead things - Acts as if death never happened - Intense dreams - Physical complaints - Crying - Blaming	- Allow the child to regress - Give physical contact - Encourage children to play & have fun - Allow safe ways to express feeling - Give simple & truthful answers to questions - Maintain structure and routines - Answer repetitive questions - Let the child cry - Take reflective listening - Include child in family rituals & mourning
5-7 years	- Understands that death is final - Interested in the biology of death - Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & injury - Has or has thoughts, actions or words caused the death - Death is punishment - Forming spiritual concepts - Wills will care for me if my caregiver dies - Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)	- Sad - Anger - Lonely - Withdrawn - Worried - Anxious - Inhibits - Confusion - Guilt - Fear	- Regressive behaviors - Specific questioning - looking for details - Acts as if the death never happened - Mixed feelings - Withdrawal - Hypnotism / sleep disturbances - Concentration difficulties - Declining or greatly improved grades - Aggressive acting out - Protective of surviving loved ones	- Allow need to regress - Give physical contact - Have intentional times together - Answer questions truthfully - Watch for confusion - Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets - Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports - Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning - Find peer support for the child - Work with school to tailor workload