## Navigating Children’s Grief: How to Help Following a Death

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<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Concepts and Beliefs</th>
<th>Difficult Emotions</th>
<th>Possible Behaviors</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
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</table>
| Birth–2 years | • No understanding of death  
• Child does not have words for feelings  
• Aware of the absence of loved one  
• Notices changes in routine  
• Notices changes in family emotions | • Longing  
• Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one  
• Fears of being abandoned  
• Anxiety | • Crying  
• Sickliness  
• Indigestion  
• Thrashing  
• Rocking  
• Throwing  
• Sucking, 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 |
| 3-5 years | • No understanding of permanence of death  
• To be dead is to be sleeping or on 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 realities | • Fear  
• Sadness  
• Insecurity  
• Confusion  
• Anger  
• Irritable  
• Agitated  
• Worried  
• Guilty | • Regressive behaviors  
• Repetitive questions  
• Withdrawn  
• Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings  
• Interested in dead things  
• Acts as if death never happened  
• Intense dreams  
• Physical complaints  
• Crying  
• Fighting | • 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  
• Talk (reflective listening)  
• Include child in family rituals & mourning |
| 6-9 years | • Understands that death is final  
• Interested in the biology of death  
• Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay  
• His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death  
• Death is punishment  
• Forming spiritual concepts  
• Who 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• Withdrawn  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  
• Irritable  
• Confusion  
• Guilty  
• Fear | • Regressive behaviors  
• Specific questioning – looking for details  
• Acts as if the death never happened  
• Hides feelings  
• Withdrawal  
• Nightmares / 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 |
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| 9-12 years      | • Understands the finality of death  
• Denial  
• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death  
• Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)  
• High death awareness (death may happen again)  
• What if my caregiver dies?  
• Formulating spiritual concepts | • Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes  
• Shock  
• Sad  
• Anger  
• Confused  
• Lonely  
• Vulnerable  
• Fear  
• Worried  
• Guilty  
• Isolated  
• Abandoned  
• Anxious | • Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods  
• Hides feelings  
• Acts like death never happened  
• Aggressive acting out  
• Withdrawal  
• Nightmares & sleep disturbances  
• Concentration difficulties  
• Changes in grades  
• Talks about physical aspects of illness or death | • Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort  
• Expect & accept mood swings  
• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.  
• Find peer support groups  
• Be available to listen and talk  
• Answer questions truthfully  
• Offer physical contact  
• Give choices about involvement in death & mourning |
| 12 years and up (teenagers) | • Understands the finality & universality of death  
• Denial  
• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death  
• Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)  
• High death awareness (death may happen again)  
• May sense own impending death  
• I need to be in control of feelings  
• If I show my feelings, I will be weak  
• Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence  
• May utilize spiritual concepts to cope | • Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief  
• Shock  
• Sad  
• Anger  
• Confused  
• Lonely  
• Vulnerable  
• Fear  
• Worried  
• Guilty  
• Isolated  
• Abandoned  
• Anxious | • Occasional regressive behavior  
• Mood swings  
• Hides feelings  
• Acts like death never happened  
• Acts out role confusion  
• Aggressive acting out  
• Withdrawal  
• Nightmares & sleep disturbances  
• Concentration difficulties  
• Changes in grades  
• Impulsive & high risk behavior  
• Changes in peer groups  
• Fighting, screaming, arguing  
• Changes in eating patterns | • Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort  
• Expect & accept mood swings  
• Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm  
• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.  
• Support relationships with understanding adults  
• Be available to listen and talk  
• Answer questions truthfully  
• Share your grief  
• Watch for high risk behavior  
• Find peer support groups  
• Offer physical contact  
• Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning |