

The Children's Room

Center for Grieving Children and Teenagers, Inc.

Children and Grief: What's Typical?

As you parent your grieving child, you may sometimes wonder, "Is what my child is feeling (or thinking or doing) normal?" We believe that grief is unique for each individual, and that the intensity and duration of grief is different for each person. There are, however, some common themes and experiences that it can be helpful to be aware of.

Some common reactions children may have following the death of a loved one"

- Having head/stomach aches
- Telling the story of how the person died again and again
- Not being able to talk about the person or the death
- Feeling helpless and powerless
- Having trouble sleeping/being scared to go to sleep/wanting to sleep a lot
- Feeling sad and crying a lot
- Feeling guilty: "It was my fault," "I could have prevented this."
- Feeling angry, confused, frustrated, and/or quick to get into a fight
- Being afraid to be alone and not wanting to stay home alone
- Withdrawing from friends or not wanting to go out as much
- Dreaming about the death, having nightmares about the person and death details
- Wanting to be with the person who died
- Finding it difficult to concentrate on work or school
- Worrying about, "Who is going to die next?"

What does death mean to children?

Children typically understand death very differently from the way adults do. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible, a belief reinforced by cartoon and video game characters who die and come to life again. Children between five and nine or ten begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know. It is often not until children are nine or ten that they may be able to begin to comprehend that death is final, irreversible, and will happen to everyone. Regardless of their age, an important part of what can help a child understand what has happened is receiving direct, accurate, and age-appropriate information from parents or other caregivers.

Why won't they talk about it?

Children's grief shows up in a variety of ways. Many children are unable to just sit with their feelings, and may be very physically active in the way they grieve. This is totally normal! Young kids may not verbalize what's going on for them, and may attempt to continue "business as usual" or act like nothing unusual has happened. This may be a way of trying to keep overwhelming feelings of shock, confusion, and grief at bay. A grieving child may be less able to pay attention in school, and more likely to act out. It is crucial to understand these behavioral changes in the context of mourning – your child may not be being "bad," but grieving.

I never know how she's going to act.

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Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

Why is he so angry?

The person who has died was essential to the stability of the child's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards the surviving family members.

Material on this page drawn from the website of the Wendt Center for Loss and Healing and from the American Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry newsletter, July 2004.

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