

Help in Time of Tragedy

Grief Reactions – differ by age and cognitive development

There is wide variability in children’s responses, even from those of the same age, but essentially the level of cognitive development determines how a person views death.

Concepts of Death

Responses

A 3 - 5 years of age (JK/SK)

- death is not final, but reversible and temporary
- sadness is due to feelings of abandonment and separation
- may feel responsible for the death
- angry at the deceased for staying away
- belief that death is contagious

- discuss what the child can concretely understand i.e., “This person is dead. We won’t see her again.”
- acknowledge feelings of sadness
- assure child that he or she is not responsible or guilty
- assure child that someone will take care of him or her (death of a parent)
- assure the child that death is not contagious

B 5 - 9 years of age (Primary)

- begins to accept death as final but alternates with hope that it may be reversible
- belief that death can be eluded
- causes are seen as violent or accidental; therefore, is not a personal threat if one is careful
- death is personified in form of person or spirit, ghosts, bogeyman, werewolves, etc.

- encourage acceptance of death
- talk openly about death to clear up misconceptions

Younger children tend to take some of our cultural euphemisms about death (“gone to sleep”) in a literal sense. This can be needlessly frightening and confusing for them.

Children may ask some explicit questions related to death and dying because this is the way that a child in a concrete operational stage of cognitive development masters such concepts. There may be confusion about the causal chains related to death and dying, including a tendency to feel an inappropriate sense of responsibility (“I often wished my brother dead, and then he died so I must have killed him.”) These aspects should be included in discussions about death with Primary-aged children.

C 9 - 12 years of age - Pre-teen (Junior)

- concept of death, including the finality, is mastered
- death is a process
- understands grief of others, yet finds death funny - responds with jokes and puns

- normal to feel sad, angry and lonely
- all right to cry openly
- accept need to say goodbye

D Teens (Intermediate/Senior)

- death and loss become intensely felt
- search for spiritual or philosophical meaning to death
- often react to fear about death with risk-taking or over-dramatization
- reality of their own death surfaces

- need clear information as to cause of death - can understand biological functioning
- need someone who will listen to questions, fears, fantasies
- must not denigrate their feelings or tell them how to feel
- should not give superficial answers to questions to which there may be no perfect responses

E Adults

The variety of grief response in adults is extensive largely due to how previous losses have or have not been resolved. Although adult cognition allows an older person to reason abstractly, the degree to which personal support systems (i.e., friends, religion, etc.) are firmly in place can determine the nature of their grief. At the same time, adults have at their disposal a large variety of strategies which they can use to avoid grieving. The perceived need to remain “in control” often causes adults to circumvent the natural grief process.

Unhealthy responses include such behaviour as:

- over-activity
- increased isolation
- self-defeating behaviour
- no apparent sense of grief
- suppression of all feelings
- increased frequency of real physical disease
- indecisiveness
- depression

If you are concerned and feel overwhelmed, please access the following community supports:

Children’s Centre Thunder Bay (807) 343-5000
A Listing of Adult Support Services 211



Your Children Our Students The Future
www.lakeheadschoools.ca

Talking About Death - Guidelines for Parents/Guardians

What do we tell children?

This will depend on the developmental age of the child(ren), the nature of the death and the emotional involvement. The concept of death undergoes continuous change as the child grows cognitively and emotionally. It will help to familiarize yourself with developmental stages as outlined in *Grief Reactions* on the reverse side.

DO

- 1 Feel comfortable asking for help. This experience need not be handled alone.
- 2 Provide the opportunity for children to ask questions. Develop an environment in which children feel perfectly safe to ask any questions, and completely confident of receiving an honest answer.
- 3 Use correct terminology related to death (i.e., avoid euphemisms – “gone on a long journey”, etc.)
- 4 Listen and empathize. Make sure you hear what is said and not what you think the student ought to have said.
- 5 Allow the children to express as much grief as they are able or willing to share with you.
- 6 Share your own feelings and tell about your own memories of the child, but don’t idealize the dead child.
- 7 Say “I don’t know” when you don’t know.
- 8 Recognize the impact of death upon children. Normal routines and behaviours may be disrupted. This is natural – be flexible. Provide opportunities for the expression of feelings – journal writing, art, creating cards, etc.. Slowly reintegrate structure.
- 9 Maintain a sympathetic attitude toward the child’s age-appropriate responses. Emphasize that no matter how bad you feel, after a time, laughing and playing does not mean you love the person less.
- 10 Emphasize that people who are loved are kept alive by memories (“grateful memory”). Organize activities that will allow children to tangibly express their grief (e.g., memorials, letters, etc.)
- 11 Discuss responses to grief. Be aware that grief reactions may occur unexpectedly.

DON'T

- 1 Don’t force a child to participate in a discussion about death. Answer honestly and as factually as you can. They may ask some questions repeatedly.
- 2 Never link suffering and death with guilt, punishment and sin.
- 3 Don’t be judgmental; don’t lecture.
- 4 Don’t force a “regular day” upon grieving children; but at the same time, don’t allow routines to be totally unstructured. Offer choices of activities, e.g., letters, journals and discussion.
- 5 Don’t say “I know how you feel” unless you truly do.
- 6 Don’t force others to look for something positive in the situation.
- 7 Don’t feel you must handle this alone. Ask for help.
- 8 Don’t expect “adult responses” from children and teenagers. Their grief responses may seem inappropriate to you (i.e., giggling).
- 9 Don’t minimize their feelings.

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