

Children and Grief

Just as death is part of life, grief is an experience everyone will undergo at some time. Children who experience grief need comfort, support, and guidance—even when adults are also struggling with their own feelings of loss.

Children Grieve, But Differently from Adults

Preschoolers do not understand that death is permanent and happens to all living things. They usually see death as reversible and temporary, a belief reinforced by cartoon characters who die and come to life again. A young child may fully expect the return of a loved one.

A child's grieving is not continuous, because a young child's capacity to experience intense emotions is limited. A child's grief is intermittent and brief, but, in fact, it usually lasts longer. The work of childhood mourning may need to be addressed at different times throughout the growing years--starting school, parent's day at school, going to camp, etc.

A child may regress to younger behaviors. Your preschooler may want a bottle again; temporarily become more infantile by demanding food, attention, and cuddling; or talk baby talk. Patience and understanding is important.

After the loss of a loved one, a child may feel unsafe and fear may intensify. Children may

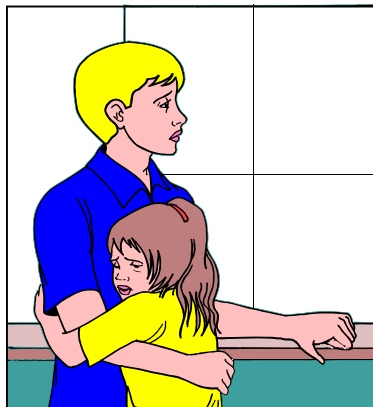
express concern over what will happen if the remaining caregiver dies. When a sibling dies, the child may wonder if he or she is next.

Anger is common during grief. A child may feel that it just isn't fair or even be angry at the person who died. Acting out and misbehaving are common. A child may get into fights, withdraw, or become oppositional. Acknowledge your child's anger to deescalate it's intensity.

Children's Grief Education Association Practical Tips

Telling Your Child about an Important Death

- Consider your emotional state; you may want to have someone with you when you inform your child.
- Keep it simple. Use "died," not "sleeping."
- Allow your child to express raw feelings freely. Offer only as much detailed information as is requested.
- Answer honestly and simply, but don't go into detail, unless asked.
 - If the death was due to violent crime, explain how the child will remain safe.
 - If the body is suitable for viewing, allow the child to see the deceased, if requested. Prepare the child for the viewing.
 - Give your child choices. Some children want to go on with their familiar daily routine.
 - Reassure your child and explain the plan for your preschooler's care.



What to Say to a Grieving Child

Offer support with a simple statement or open-ended question; avoid hurtful words.

Words that can help
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I'm sorry your mom/dad/sister died.• I care about you.• Tell me about your _____.• I'm here to listen if you want to talk.
Words that can hurt
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I know how you feel.• You'll get over it.• Don't cry.• Be strong.

Should a Child Attend a Funeral?

A basic guideline is to let your child decide what to do. Many children prefer to attend; others prefer not to attend. A child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go. However, honoring the person in some way (lighting a candle or looking at pictures) may be helpful. Preschoolers may have a difficult time sitting through a service, but may find it meaningful when they are older to know that they had a chance to say goodbye.

Prepare your child for what will be experienced. Will there be a body? Will there be highly expressive people at the service? Talk about what to expect. If there is a body to view, explain that their loved one is not hurting, hungry or cold. If your family chose cremation, explain that the body was put into a room that was very, very hot until their bodies turned to soft, powdery ashes. Assure the child that the loved one experienced no pain during cremation.

Feelings of Guilt

Young children often believe they are the cause of what happens around them. Even when there is no connection between a child's actions and the death, a child may have

feelings of guilt. A child may believe that small things such as not putting toys away, talking back, or wishing the person dead caused the death of a loved one. It is important to help young children understand that nothing they said or did caused, or could have prevented, the death. Accidents and sickness cause death.

Supporting Your Child through Grief

A young child may show little immediate grief, you might think your preschooler is unaffected by the loss. Children may not fully process a deeply felt loss until their teenage years. Children might express their sadness on and off over a long period of time. It can be painful to be reminded of loss again and again, but children need patience, understanding, and support to complete their grieving.



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