



Understanding Children's Grief

Our culture has, with the best of intentions, sheltered children from death and dying with hope and assumption that we can shelter them from grief. We now know that children benefit from participating in the dying and mourning process of others with things like funerals, hospital visits, etc.

Children experience grief intensely but only at their developmental level:

- Young children oftentimes do not understand the permanency of death, and will repeatedly ask when grandma will wake up, or when daddy will come home.
- Children often incorporate death in their play as a way of processing the loss.
- Most grieving kids continue doing what kids do (sports, school, sleepover parties). They grieve in small increments so as not to become overwhelmed with fear, sadness, or rejection.
- Children can cry and express distraught feelings over a loss, and then within a short period of time, go back to playing a game or asking to go to the mall.
- Children can also assume a responsibility for death because of things they may have done or said, including wishful/magical thinking.
- Children often need help capturing and documenting memories, especially younger children.

Common Responses of the Grieving Child

- Fear of being separated from the parent
- Crying, whimpering, screaming, immobility and/or aimless motion, trembling, and excessive clinging.
- Parents may notice children returning to behaviors exhibited at earlier ages such as thumb-sucking, bedwetting, and fear of darkness.
- Children are strongly affected by the parents' reactions to the event.
- Some children may seem to show no overt response to the death and may even be "happy" that they are gone. Do not shame or disapprove of these responses. Just let them be.
- Children may become fearful of their own death, or the death of a parent. Let them know who will take care of them if you die. List all the people in their lives that love them.
- Some children may think that they have somehow caused the death and take responsibility. Let them know that they are in no way responsible even if they wanted the deceased to go away.

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