



# Understanding the Grieving Child: Sad isn't always bad

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# Objectives

- Review a child's understanding of death and dying from a developmental perspective
- Outline key points for communicating with young children about death
- Discuss normative reactions to loss and highlight signs and symptoms that warrant concern
- Discuss helpful strategies for helping a child cope with loss
- Provide additional resources for providers and families



# The Experience of Loss in Childhood

- Children may experience a number of losses in their young lives
- Just like adults, children need to mourn
- How they mourn, however, may look different than what we as adults might expect
- How a child experiences, understands, and copes with the loss is related to their developmental stage, their previous experience(s) with loss, their individual temperament, and family factors
- Grief is a process that can be expected to ebb and flow over time and to last for quite some time



# Understanding Death

Age (years)	Understanding
0-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Has no cognitive understanding of death</li><li>- Can react to separation and disruption of caretaking</li></ul>
2-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Death is reversible and temporary</li><li>- View of world is very literal and concrete</li><li>- Magical thinking occurs</li></ul>
6-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Gradual understanding of irreversibility and finality of death</li><li>- Concrete reasoning and ability to comprehend cause and effect</li><li>- Tendency to personify death</li></ul>
12+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Death is irreversible, universal, and inevitable</li><li>- Beginning of abstract thinking, philosophical views on life and death</li></ul>

# Tips to Share with Parents: Speaking to Children about Death and Dying

NOT talking about it communicates more than you may realize

Offer children honest explanations, answering questions in **SIMPLE, BRIEF, CONCRETE** language appropriate for their age

Take the child's lead: they may have lots of questions or they may have none

- Don't be surprised if a child has no reaction
- Don't be upset if children's questions seem crude

Expect the need for repetition, multiple conversations

- There is a limit to the amount of information a young child can absorb at a time

Ask clarifying questions

Give yourself permission to admit that you don't always have all the answers

Do not mask your own emotions

“Uncle Tony died. His body wasn't working anymore and the doctors couldn't fix it. When people die they do not breathe, eat, talk, think, or feel anymore.”

“Aunt Hannah lived a long time before she died. Most people do live a long time, but some don't. I expect you and I will both live a long time.”

“I don’t expect to die for a long time. I expect to be here to take care of you as long as you need me, but if Mommy and Daddy died, there would be lots of people to take care of you. There's Aunt Ellen and Uncle John, or Grandma.”

"I miss Grandma. I loved her too. We're both sad, aren't we?"

## Avoid Euphemisms!

**“Eternal Rest”**

**“Rest in Peace”**

**“Gone to sleep”**



# Avoid Euphemisms!

**“Went away”**



Avoid Euphemisms!

“Lost”

**THEN LET'S GO FIND HIM!!**

# Normative Reactions to Loss

- Every child is different
- Reactions may be very different than that of an adult and may change over time
- It is typical for reactions to fluctuate
  
- Emotional reactions can vary widely
  - Sadness
  - Guilt
  - Anger
  - Fear
  - Confusion
  - Shock
  - Disbelief



# Normative Reactions to Loss

- Behavioral Reactions

- Crying
- Increased clinginess
- Withdrawal
- Irritability and Acting out
  - Tantrums, talking back, having an attitude, getting into fights
- Lack of interest in school
- Difficulty sleeping, including nightmares
- Regression
  - Thumb sucking, bed wetting, baby talk
- Increased physical complaints
- Increased talk about death and dying
  - Even expressions of wanting to die to be with the person they have lost
- Death-related play; preoccupation with death

# Signs of Concern

## i.e., When to suggest seeking professional help

• In general, **persistent** symptoms that are present most of the day, every day for a prolonged period of time

- Significant Personality/Behavior change
- Refusal to go to school
- Significant academic decline
- Suicidal thoughts
- Persistent anger, irritability, sadness
- Social withdrawal
- Severe separation anxiety
- Delinquency, promiscuity, aggression, substance use
- Persistent sleep problems



## Message to Parents

**If you are worried about how your child is coping with the loss, it certainly won't hurt to have a professional weigh in. You know your child best and trust your judgment if you feel something is "off"**

## Tips to Share with Parents: Helping a child cope

- Create a safe space to share thoughts and feelings; allow the child to speak of the loss
- Send the message that there is no right or wrong way to feel
- Admit to your own emotions
- Provide reassurance
  - That they will be loved and cared for by a consistent adult
  - That they did not cause the death and could not have prevented it
  - That they are safe
- Facilitate reliable daily routine and structure
  - School!



## Tips to Share with Parents: Helping a child cope

- Provide an opportunity to say goodbye
  - In person, at funeral, in a letter or a video, through a card or drawing
- Facilitate continuing bonds
  - Talk of memories often
  - Create a memory box or book
  - Look at pictures
  - Visit gravesite
- Encourage emotional expression but don't force it
- Share your spiritual beliefs

# Conclusions

- As kids learn how to deal with death, they need space, understanding, and patience to grieve in their own way
- Be open and honest with your emotions and in your communication with your child
- Emotional and behavioral reactions to loss are normative, but seek professional help if symptoms persist or represent a significant personality change for your child
- Each child will cope differently with loss but reassurance, routine, and remaining connected to the love one can promote healthy grieving



# Resources for Providers, Parents, and Children

- Books
  - Bereaved children and teens, E.A. Grollman
  - Healing a child's grieving heart, A.D. Wolfelt
  - I miss you (a first look at death), P. Thomas
  - Badger's Parting Gifts, S. Varley
  - The Invisible String, P. Karst
  - Help me say goodbye, J. Silverman
- Websites
  - Kidshealth.org
  - The Dougy Center <http://www.dougy.org/>
  - National Alliance for Grieving Children <http://childrengrieve.org/>

