

CHILDREN & GRIEF BY AGES & STAGES

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Children do grieve. Grief is expressed differently emotionally and physically depending on the age of the child. As an adult, try not to impose your expectations on a child regarding how he/she should look, act or feel in reaction to death. Knowing the age-stage of the grieving child can help you help the child.



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Birth to age 3:

1. **View of death:** The child sees death as a loss, separation or abandonment. Death as a concept is hard to understand. There is no sense of permanence.
2. **Warning signs:** Seek help if you see that the child is unresponsive, quiet, and sluggish, or changes sleep patterns. Conversely, a child can "act out" and become aggressive, hard to settle and irritable.
3. **Help the child:** Keep schedules normal, (ie. Feedings, naps, play time, going to bed). Give them as much security and reassurance as possible.

Age 3 to 6:

1. **View of death:** At this stage, a child sees things as reversible and temporary. Death and life are hard to separate. They may believe in "magical thinking" and that their thoughts can cause things to happen such as a death, or bringing someone back to life.
2. **Warning signs:** Children may exhibit nightmares, confusion, eating, sleeping, bladder or bowel problems and/or revert to an earlier stage of development. Sometimes they may even seem to be unaffected by the death. Do not hesitate to get help as soon as possible if behavior is changed.
3. **Help the child:** Talk about the death using books and stories. Explain to the child that they did not "think" the death or make it happen. Teach them that if they are "good" doesn't mean the person who has died will return. In other words, the child's thoughts and behaviors had nothing to do with dying.

Age 7 & 8:

1. **View of death:** Children start seeing death as final. The concept for many kids is that death happens to the old but not to them. Many questions will emerge about death.
2. **Warning signs:** Children may have problems in school, become aggressive, quiet, clingy, or think they have numerous health problems. Watch for signs of depression such as crying all the time, not wanting to get out of bed or thoughts of dying. They may not want to sleep in their own bed anymore. Take everything seriously. Do not hesitate to get help as soon as possible if behavior has changed.
3. **Help the child:** Talk about the death in an open and honest manner. Have the child draw, write and tell a story about the person who has died. Answer their questions honestly and be honest with them about your emotions. Encourage them to talk. If they ask complicated questions, answer them fully. At this age a child can handle deep concepts and generally has a big curiosity.

Age 9 & Up

1. **View of death:** By now the child understands that death is going to happen. By the time kids are 12 they know for sure it is final and irreversible. They not only know it could happen to someone else but also to themselves.
2. **Warning signs:** Children may exhibit a wide range of feelings including: shock, denial, anxiety, fear, anger, depression or even withdrawal. Their reactions begin to be much more like an adult except they may act out their grief by behavioral changes at home or school. Take everything seriously. Do not hesitate to get help as soon as possible if behavior changes and seems inappropriate.
3. **Help the child:** Talk about the death openly and honestly. Answer the child's questions completely. Be forthright about your emotions. Encourage the child to talk. Listen patiently. Do not try to "correct" their feelings. Help the child find others in their age group to talk to.