



CHILDREN AND GRIEF

"Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve."

-Alan Wolfelt

What is grief?

- It is any reaction to a perceived loss: a death, divorce, moving, changing schools, serious illness, etc...
- It is normal, natural and necessary
- It is holistic. A child may have reactions that show themselves in many ways. Reactions can be loosely grouped into five major areas: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social.

A grieving child may experience:

Physical

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in eating habits
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches, sore throat, etc...)
- Become sick more often
- Muscle tension

Mental/Intellectual

- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in school performance
- Forgetfulness
- Distractedness

Social

- Difficulty with new roles at home or at school
- The desire to play one minute and become upset the next
- Anxiety over being alone
- A desire to withdraw from peers and/or family

Emotional

- Shock, denial or numbness
- Fear (of the dark, that someone else will die, that they will die, etc...)
- Anger or aggressive behaviors
- "Grief bursts" or crying spells that last for a brief time
- Sadness, depression or apathy
- Blaming themselves or feeling guilty about things they did or said before the death
- Relief or happiness
- Overwhelmed or confused
- Anxiety or worry

Spiritual

- Questions about the afterlife
- Asking, "why?"
- Changes in spiritual/religious beliefs
- Sensing the presence of the deceased person
- Powerful dreams

Children’s Developmental Stages and Grief:

AGE	UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH	EXPRESSIONS OF GRIEF	WHAT YOU CAN DO
INFANTS AGES 0- 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May experience loss as an absence, particularly of a primary caregiver. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Changes in normal patterns of eating, sleeping, bowel and bladder habits, and interacting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer physical comfort. Maintain a routine. Provide stable environment.
PRESCHOOLERS AGES 3 – 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Death is temporary and/or reversible. Dead person continues to live and function in some ways. May feel responsible for death because of wishes and thoughts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grief expressed primarily through play. May reenact the death. May ask questions about the death over and over again. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow “death play.” Join in and offer guidance. Answer questions honestly and simply. Use drawings and stories to help children express feelings.
GRADE SCHOOLERS AGES 6 – 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Beginning to see death as permanent. Death happens to others. May see death as a person or spirit—a ghost or the bogeyman. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curious about death. Will ask specific questions and want details. Concerned with how others are responding. May exhibit aggressive behavior (especially boys). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answer questions honestly and simply. Talk to them about how you are feeling and let them know it is ok to express their grief. Offer constructive “venting” activities.
ADOLESCENTS AGES 12 AND UP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A more mature understanding of death as permanent and universal. Egocentrism may cause an “it won’t happen to me” philosophy Just beginning to explore spiritual aspects of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heightened emotions of anger, guilt, and shame. May exhibit depression, denial, and repression. May act out, withdraw, exhibit mood swings and/or engage in impulsive behaviors, including sexual behaviors. May idealize the deceased, especially if deceased is friend, sibling, or parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tolerate acting out behaviors if teen or others are not being harmed. Be available, but do not take control. Encourage search for meaning—questions about life and death—as long as teen or others are not harmed.

Helpful Websites:

www.hospicefoundation.org/griefandLoss/

www.hospicenet.org

www.kidsgrief.com

References:

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Goldman, L. (1994). *Life After Loss: A Guild to Help Grieving Children*, Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development Inc.

Grollman, Rabbi E. (1995). Grieving children can we answer their questions? In J. Doka (Ed.) *Children Mourning, Mourning Children*. Washington, DC: Hospice Foundation of America

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