

PARENT HANDOUT

Children's Understanding and Reactions to Death

We know children do grieve, however their understanding and reaction to death can vary. Their age, the way the person died, other things that are happening in their life, and past experiences or problems can influence their grief. Children may show a variety of feelings or show none at all. A lack of emotions may reflect a lack of understanding about what happened due to their being too young or be from shock about what happened. Keep in mind that there is a wide range of common grief reactions.

AGE	UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH	COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS	SIGNS OF DIFFICULTY
Infant- 3 yr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are not able to understand that death is something final and the person will never come back. Therefore they may talk and act as if they will see the person again. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children this age are reacting most to separation from their usual caregivers and changes in their usual routine. • It is common to find they are not sleeping or eating as usual or perhaps regress and do things they outgrew. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs that very young children are having difficulty include repetitive play about the death or the person • Behavioral and emotional signs include persistent problems getting back on schedule or meeting developmental milestones, and difficulty being comforted.
3-5 yr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschoolers have a very limited and concrete understanding of death. For example, if something moves, it is alive and if it is not moving it is dead. In addition, they may think a person could come back to life (move again), and even if buried, believe the person can still do human things like breathe and be hungry. • They often believe death is a punishment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When someone dies and is “missing” in a child’s life, a preschooler can worry when separated from others. • They may express their fears, sadness, and confusion by having nightmares, tantrums, clinging to adults, being withdrawn, or returning to earlier behaviors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of difficulty include those seen in younger children • In addition, children may return to earlier behaviors such as tantrums and bed wetting

6-9 yr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By school age, they begin to understand some people can die, like the elderly, and do not come back to life. They may think death is a person – like a boogey man who comes for you. • It's not unusual for them to think their own bad thoughts or actions killed someone). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They may ask lots of questions about the death. • A child's upset and sadness at this age often comes out as being angry, fighting, and being irritable. • They may also be withdrawn, complain about physical aches and pains, and have problems with school work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As with younger children, repeated talk or play related to the death as well as nightmares may signal a problem. • In addition, after a month's time, if a child seems withdrawn, to be hiding feelings, especially guilty, and avoids talking about the person, places or things related to the death and what happened, or seems jumpy, extra alert, or worried about people's health and safety the child may be having trouble.
10-12 yr	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children this age have an adult understanding of death. They know a dead person cannot come back to life and a dead person's body doesn't function (e.g. can't breathe). • They also know that everyone will die someday, and it can happen at any time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their reactions are more adult like. • They may be sad, withdrawn, and cry or be angry and irritable. • They may be fearful or worry about the safety or health of themselves or others • Signs of distress may show up by trouble sleeping, problems in school, or having physical complaints. • They may blame themselves or feel responsible for others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children at this age have problems similar to those found in children 6-9 years of age • Problems with schoolwork and a drop in grades may also be a sign a child is having upsetting thoughts

13-teen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like the 10-12 year olds, teens have a full adult understanding of death. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teens have similar reactions to pre-teens and adults but often hide their true feelings. • In particular they may be withdrawn, sad, and lose interest in things. • They also can act out, have trouble in school, and engage in risky behavior. • They have a tendency toward feeling guilt and shame. • They have thoughts, fears, and worries about the future. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signs of difficulty are similar to those of the 10-12 year old child. • In addition, talk of wanting to harm oneself and engaging in dangerous activities should be taken seriously • Feelings of revenge or worries about the future may be more intense and mean a teen is having problems.
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In general, when children or teens have very upsetting memories, are avoiding things or feelings or having physical, emotional, or learning problems, it can mean they are having a traumatic grief reaction. For children of any age, if common grief reactions continue for over a month, begin for the first time after relative calm, get worse, or interfere with the child being with friends, going to school, or enjoying activities, additional help may be needed.

Sources

- Kidsource.com/sids/childrengrief.html (Retrieved April 2006)
- Goodman, R.F. et al (2002) Caring for kids after trauma and death: A guide for parents and professionals. Aboutourkids.org/articles/crisis_guide02.pdf (Retrieved April 2006)
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