

# CHILDREN'S GRIEF

*"Anyone Old Enough to Love is Old Enough to Grieve" Dr. Alan Wolfelt*

## **WHAT DOES MY CHILD KNOW ABOUT DEATH?**

Many times families have created a structure in their lives that includes how to react to death or what happens after death. Some families have rituals set in place through their religion, while others create new ones. It is important to know what your child understands developmentally in order to include them appropriately in explaining and honoring the death of their loved one. The following explains how children comprehend death so you are better able to communicate and share this experience with them.

### **Infants and Toddlers**

- Infants and toddlers generally have no concept of death.
- They are more reactive to *your* feelings and behavior
- They may exhibit more crankiness, clinginess, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, or regressions in behaviors such as potty training.
- It is important to keep your daily routine as normal as you can to provide a sense of security, normalcy, and comfort.
- Offer physical assurances like holding and cuddling.

### **Ages 3-5:**

- Preschoolers see death as temporary or reversible.
- They can have magical thinking about death, as it is not always portrayed truthfully on television or movies. This is also when children believe their thoughts and wishes can cause things to happen. For this reason children may irrationally feel responsible for the death because of thoughts or wishes they had prior to the death
- They are curious and may ask questions repeatedly and frequently; this is normal behavior, and it is how they learn.
- They need to hear and use real terms like "dead" and "death," but they also need simplicity in your answers.
- They may not have the words to explain how they are feeling. You are likely to see expressions of grief through behavior and through play with toys and/or drawing.
- Preschool children may also regress in their behavior in areas of sleep, potty training, or eating. They may become clingy, or appear irritable, confused or suffer from nightmares.
- They might begin having separation issues. When you must leave the child, it might be helpful to prepare them in advance that you will be leaving and provide them with reassurance about when you will return.
- Respond to their needs by explaining each aspect of the situation honestly.
- They need physical reassurances such as hugging and holding.
- They are aware of changes in patterns and routine. Provide them with a lot of reassurance, nurturing, and consistency.

### **Ages 6-9:**

- Younger elementary school children start to understand that death is final. They realize that they can die, as well as people they love, and may begin to fear death.
- Their reactions can include crying, anxiety, or an unwillingness to talk about the death. Because they are just beginning their development of the concept of death and dying, they rely on your compassion and reassurance to let them know they are all right.
- They may be interested in the process of dying and ask 'how' or 'why' things have happened. Their questioning may be repetitive.
- Death is often personified as things like ghosts and monsters.
- They may have strong feelings of grief and loss but can't express this in appropriate ways. They may express feelings through anger and frustration. They may need permission and encouragement to grieve.
- Symbolic play can be helpful; allow them to talk, draw, or tell stories about the person.

### **Ages 9-12**

- Death to tweens is very personal and realistic. They understand that death is forever; however they still may engage in denial that it will happen to them
- They are curious about the physical aspects of death – what does the body look like? what does it feel like? Provide straightforward explanations.
- Children at this age will look for permission to show feelings and participate in honoring the baby. Remember that their feelings are important and need to be validated to promote healthy grieving.
- They may be concerned with how others are reacting to the death. What is the right way to react? How should they react?
- In response to the death, they may feel denial, guilt, or anger. They may also begin to show signs of separation anxiety, and their performance at school may decline.
- Give honest and compassionate answers to reassure it is all right to feel the way they do.
- Involve them. Allow them to give input and make choices regarding funerals, memorials, belongings, etc
- Even older kids need to be hugged and held to give assurance that you are available and going through this with them.

## Teenagers

- Teens have more adult thought processes, are able to think abstractly about the implications of death and related concepts such as afterlife. They have feelings of immortality, yet are able to realize the fragility of life.
- Besides general expressions of grief, they may become preoccupied with death or dying, or may exhibit risk-taking behavior.
- Encouraging communication and being available to listen to your child about their feelings will help their grieving process. Set a good example by speaking about your own feelings surrounding the death (without putting them in the role of the comforter).
- Involve them. Allow them to give input and make choices regarding funerals, memorials, belongings, etc.
- They may try to make sense of things, philosophize, and/or search for meaning.
- Teen mourning may be more traditional – extreme sadness, anger, denial. Even though they are capable of expressing grief they may choose not to.
- They may feel forced to act as a consolers and comforter for younger children or adults.
- Teens may be more willing to talk about grief with people outside of the family. Grief camps and support groups may be helpful.

## WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO MY GRIEVING CHILD?

**Children want to share their experience of grief with adults.** You're child's love for the person who died is very special. They usually want to share their feelings; they do not want to be told how to feel. They want adults to listen to how they experience loss. Using open-ended questions can help you to hear what your child feels. When talking about the loved one you can ask things like, "What would you like to do for him/her?"

**Never deceive your child to protect them. Children need honesty.** In general, children find ways to cope with sad news. It is important to refrain from using clichés, half-truths, and fairy tales that cannot explain the mystery of death. Lying, or dismissing the topic, leaves too much to their imagination. It may teach the child that we don't have to be honest when dealing with others. Unhealthy explanations can also create fear, doubt, or anger. Remember, children think literally. Using phrases like "we lost him/her," "he/she is sleeping with God," "he/she went on a trip," or "he/she is watching over you" can be confusing because of the literal meaning of the phrases, and because they do not explain what has happened. Instead, use a phrase like, "\_\_\_\_\_ died. That means her heart stopped beating and her body doesn't work anymore. She is not with us like she used to be, but we will always remember and love her very much." This explains literally what happened and how you feel about it. Children need simple, honest answers.

**Allow your child to ask questions.** Younger children tend to repeat the same questions, perhaps to assure themselves that the story is still the same. Each time you repeat the story honestly you are allowing the child to understand more deeply. Because you, too, are grieving, you may feel frustrated by this process. Children learn how to cope with their grief from your sincere feelings, actions, and responses to their questions. Do your best to be patient and open, and ask for help when you need it.

**Children want to be heard and understood.** Each child's thoughts and feelings are important and must be treated as such. Children are very sensitive to energy levels, moods, tones of voices, and choices of words. They know you are actively listening to them when you make eye contact and respond without judgment.

**We don't grieve in steps or stages.** Don't expect your child to grieve in an orderly fashion. They generally grieve in shorter bursts, with a wide range of emotions and reactions. They cannot sustain grief in the same way as adults; they grieve, then move away from the pain (and often turn to play). Each child is different and special, even when they are in the same family. The length of time a child grieves and how they show their grief depends on their emotional investment in the situation.

**We experience grief as a process, not an event.** The healing process happens over time. A grieving child is unable to hurry through their emotions and get over it. Just as you will miss your loved one on special occasions like birthdays and holidays, so will your child. If they cannot communicate how they feel verbally, it is possible they will express it in their behavior.

## HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY CHILD NEEDS ADDITIONAL INTERVENTION?

Children, just as you, will continue to grieve and heal over time. The following behaviors can be indicators that your child needs more help in finding healthy ways to grieve. You may want to consider seeking more help if you have any serious concerns, or if your child...

- Pretends nothing ever happened
- Develops a fear of school or school work dramatically declines
- Threatens suicide
- Frequently panics or show excessive anxiety
- Physically assaults others, or is cruel to animals
- Behaves poorly with family members
- Begins committing serious socially delinquent acts
- Is unwilling or unable to socialize with other children