

COVID-19 Resources

- Supporting Kidds
 - 1213 Old Lancaster Pike Hockessin, DE 19707. Support@supportingkidds.org, 302-235-5544
- Riverfront Counseling
 - 555 Justison St Suite 101C. RiverfrontCounseling@gmail.com, 302-300-0335
- [Finding the Right Words to Talk to Children and Teens about COVID-19](#)
- [Talking to Children about COVID 19](#)
- [Guide to Mental Health Resources for COVID-19](#)
- Books about grief and feelings
 - [A Terrible Thing Happened](#)
 - [Glad Monster Sad Monster](#)
 - [When Something Terrible Happens-a workbook for parents and kids](#)
- Mindfulness/Self Affirmation Card Decks
 - [Be Mindful Card Deck for Teens](#)
 - [Kids Affirmation Cards](#)
 - [Power Thought Cards-Adult/Teen](#)

Developmental Considerations in Childhood Grief

Children’s conceptual understanding of death, typical reactions to death, and needs as they cope with death change over time. Although each child and situation are different, here are some general developmental differences in grieving children.

Age 2 and Under

Understanding of Death

- Can sense that something is different; feel a change in the emotional atmosphere
- Do not understand what death is
- Probably will not have direct memories of the person who died

Common Reactions

- Increased fussiness and irritability
- Increased clinging to adults
- Regression in behaviors or skills
- Reduced interest in curious exploration of the environment
- Increased watchfulness of adults for cues about the prevailing mood of the home and safety

What May Help

- Ensuring that an emotionally available caregiver is present
- Maintaining as closely as possible a normal daily routine
- Reassurance and physical affection
- As few changes in the child’s daily life as possible
- Providing various comfort devices such as special blankets, stuffed animals, soothing music

Ages 3-5

Understanding of Death

- Egocentric and concrete: see death as a loss of love and protection, as abandonment
- Perceive death as temporary, believe that the person will return or can be visited
- May forget that the person has died
- May not have direct memories of the person who died
- May associate the death with preceding event(s) (e.g. going to the hospital or going to work)
- See some distinction between life and death, in that they associate life with movement and death with lack of movement; however, may confuse death with sleep
- May attribute life to inanimate, moving objects

Common Reactions

- Feeling abandoned, fearful and lonely
- Denial of the reality of death
- Regression in behaviors or skills
- Confusion about the cause of the death
- Feeling sad, but often only for short periods – escaping into play gives adults the impression that the child is not grieving
- May substitute attachment to the person who died to another person
- Nightmares

- Increased non-compliance or aggression

Developmental Considerations in Childhood Grief, *continued*

What May Help

- Consistent repetition of the facts surrounding the death
- Simple explanations about what is happening (e.g. funerals, rituals, burial, the death)
- Someone to support them and answer questions at high-stress times (e.g. following the death, funerals, visits to the cemetery)
- Accurate, honest information geared to their level of understanding
- Physical contact, calm/soothing tones, quiet times
- Reassurances about their future, about pre-death events, and any other concerns
- Discussion about what the deceased can no longer do (breathe, eat, play, etc.)
- Maintaining normal routines and expectations to the degree possible

Ages 6-8

Understanding of Death

- Age of great interest in the body and its functions, resulting in lots of body-oriented questions
- Fear death the most of any age, especially fearful of mutilation and physical injury
- See life as linear, with a beginning and an end
- Language is used and understood literally - death is seen in the context of previous experiences and the cessation of body functions (often results in comparing stories of death and “gory” conversations and questions)
- Still magical thinkers: Personify death as monsters or ghosts, engage in wishful thinking (if only...), and see death as external and avoidable (won’t happen to them or their loved ones)
- View of death can be distorted by its portrayal in movies and on television (e.g. it is sudden, violent, not final, and something that happens only to bad guys)
- May see death as punishment for some wrongdoing by the deceased or themselves
- Gradually come to see death as natural, universal, and permanent

Common Reactions

- Use thinking skills to grapple with the loss. Ask a lot of specific questions, do research into the illness or injury, or into the physical aspects of death
- Has difficulty putting concerns or feelings into words
- Identifies strongly with the person who died; may adopt habits or roles of the deceased
- Have fears: of being abandoned, of changes in their world, of more family deaths
- Feeling guilty for the death; blaming self for causing or not preventing it
- Compulsive care-giving: feeling responsible for the family’s future or happiness
- Body complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, restlessness, diarrhea, bedwetting
- Regression in behaviors or skills
- Fears and phobias, resulting in difficulty separating, nightmares, refusal to do some activities

What May Help

- Permission to decide their own level of involvement in rituals, funerals and gatherings
- A support person and role model for appropriate grieving

- Information and reassurances about their grief reactions and feelings, their responsibility for the death, their future, their safety
- Encouragement to engage in concrete survival activities (e.g. cooking, cleaning, eating)
- Encouragement to reconnect with child-oriented interests and activities

Developmental Considerations in Childhood Grief, *continued*

- Concrete factual information:
 - Answers and explanations should be accurate and literal, without euphemisms
 - Relate the death to any previous death experiences
 - Explain death in terms of body functions (e.g. breathing, heart, brain, eyes)
 - Be cautious about describing life after death; it can be confusing because child needs to understand that death is defined as the end of bodily life

Ages 9-12

Understanding of Death

- Becoming less egocentric - developing a sense of the impact of death on others
- Transition from concrete to abstract thinking allows children to: understand the universality and inevitability of death, generalize about death and understand its magnitude, begin to believe that it can happen to anyone, and struggle with this realization
- Interest in what the dying person experiences; fears it is painful & scary
- See death as a natural part of life; as a cessation of life and bodily functions
- Interest in what happens to the body and spirit after death: fear non-existence and separation
- Develop personal theories of death – why it happens, how it is “decided” who will die, etc.

Common Reactions

- Anxiety and general fearfulness
- Covering up emotions and trying to appear normal (e.g. joking, acting tough, being cool)
- Concern about other survivors
- Concern about personal future and security
- Withdrawal from, or endless questions about, the death
- Body complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, restlessness, diarrhea, bedwetting
- Regression in behaviors or skills

What May Help

- Honest and accurate information about the death
- Opportunities to ask their own questions
- Reassurance about their future (e.g. if the other parent were to die, who would care for them and how)
- Adults to model appropriate grieving and sharing of fears, thoughts, and feelings
- Respect for privacy as required: privacy of their thoughts, feelings, writings
- Inclusion, as wished, in adult activities associated with the death: rituals, discussions, plans

Teens

Understanding of Death

- Able to see death as final, irreversible, and universal
- Believe death is a distant reality that only affects other people’s lives -- but this belief of invincibility is directly challenged by the fact that a death occurred in their lives
- Able to think abstractly in “what ifs,” to ponder deeper meanings in the human experience, and ask deep questions about the meaning of life and death – the search for meaning is intensified by a death in the teen’s life

Developmental Considerations in Childhood Grief, *continued*

Common Reactions

- Symptoms of anxiety, such as body complaints, phobias, overly-cautious behavior
- Increased risk-taking in defiance of death (e.g., drug use, sexual activity, reckless driving)
- Fear of being singled out as different may lead them to cover up feelings and try to appear normal by joking, acting cool, pretending nothing has changed, etc.
- Concern about one's future, security, and death
- Interference with the developmental task of forming a sense of identity (e.g. attempting to grow up quicker or to assume the roles of the deceased person rather than following their own path to self-identity)
- The naturally-occurring moodiness and defiance of teens can be intensified by the added stress of dealing with a death
- Intense spiritual and philosophical questioning and doubt (e.g. wondering why death happens to the "good" people, angry with God)
- The normal struggle for autonomy may either be hampered or exaggerated: rather than continuing to venture out and assert oneself, the teen may shrink back, become more dependent, and halt the developmental process *OR* the teen may feel such a strong conflict between feeling longing for the deceased vs. the need to be independent that he/she attempts to halt the grief process by distancing from the family and focusing on "my life"
- Intense anger at the loss, and anger at the person who died. These displays may also serve to hide other feelings and to help the teen regain a sense of power and control
- Depression and guilt, accompanied by isolation or suicidal thoughts

What May Help

- Educating teens about the normal process of grief to help them see that what they are experiencing is normal, and that there are other teens in their same situation
- Honest and accurate information about the death
- Discussion of philosophical concerns related to death
- Highlighting the natural conflict between the normal tasks of adolescence vs. tasks of grief
- Respect for the desire to keep some feelings and thoughts private
- Recognition that behavior may not accurately reflect underlying feelings (e.g. assume that the person is in pain and wants to receive information and support, regardless of the external behavior that may seem distant, disinterested, or testy)
- Communicating a tolerance for all feelings
- Providing specific coping tools (e.g. ideas for managing stress, journaling, and a variety of ways to express one's feelings)
- Encouragement to focus attention and energy on teen pursuits and the future

REPEAT, REVISIT, REWORK...

As children grow, their reactions, ability to understand the loss, and ability to grapple with their feelings grows. Give them lots of opportunities to retell, rehear, and revisit the loss as the months and years go by so that their relationship with the deceased, and understanding of the loss and its significance in their lives are able to mature with them.

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