



UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GRIEVING CHILDREN

1-3 Years Old

Children react to the emotions around them. They won't understand, but they will react. They don't understand permanence, so they will ask the same questions repeatedly. They receive security from hearing the same answer to the same question. They cannot grasp abstractions such as heaven. They will worry about who will care for them and may try to communicate feelings via bodily complaints such as "I'm not hungry," or "My tummy aches."

3-5 Years Old

Death is viewed as temporary and equated with sleeping. Simple questions require simple answers. Regression and increased aggression are common. It's still hard to discern between a short absence and a long one but the separation is difficult. They will repeat the same questions as they try to understand.

6-8 Years Old

Six year olds may still view death as reversible – watch for magical thinking. They may somehow feel responsible for the death through thoughts, actions or wishes. At this age the capacity for guilt is developing. Children express feelings through behavior. Cause and effect is forming; there is some understanding of what death involves and this may result in a fear of death. Children in this age range may fear forgetting so may identify with the deceased in order to remember them. They may personify – put into monster form to grasp – the supernatural and are often fascinated by physical facts. Denial, constant questions, feelings of guilt and feeling very different from others are common reactions. Reassurance and a sense of security are important.

9-12 Years Old

Independence is developing as relationships with peers increase in importance and clearer understanding about death is forming. A lot of questions and perhaps fears related to the result of death are common. Secondary issues such as "Will we have to move?" or "What will we do about vacation this year?" are of concern. Life is seen in a black and white manner. Children this age often separate right from wrong, and death may be viewed as punishment. Grief may go unrecognized as pseudo-adult like behavior is assumed. There is a tendency to intellectualize and act as if it doesn't matter. A fear of abandonment keeps them on this cognitive level, so stress your support and availability to them. Physical complaints, tendency of fearfulness, denial, or anxiety are common responses.

(over)

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES**REACTIONS****SUGGESTIONS****1-3 Years**

Sense adults reactions

Won't remember the deceased

Cannot grasp concept of death

Depends on nonverbal
communications

Realizes when someone is missing

Fear of abandonment/rejection

Crying

Clinginess

Anxiety

Tell a story

Draw a picture

Encourage play – dolls, puppets

Coloring books on life cycles

Provide physical comfort

Concrete language

Maintain routine

Minimize change

Allow participation

3-5 Years

View death as temporary

Question cause of death

Can't grasp concept of heaven

May equate loss with punishment

Matter-of-fact curiosity

Can't put feelings into words

Regression – e.g. thumb sucking
or toilet training problems

Increased aggression

Escape into play

Can appear unaffected

Fearful

“Who will take care of me?”

Model your own grief

Brief, honest explanations

Avoid euphemisms (“dead” not
“sleeping,” etc.

Read books to explain

Discipline consistently

Spend time with the child

Maintain routine

Give child choice to attend funeral

6-8 Years

Magical thinking

Unrealistic fears

Fascinated by physical details

Grasps finality of death

Expresses feeling through
behavior

Anger

Blames self – guilt

Feels helpless and responds with
increased aggression

Reaction can be delayed

Set aside a daily “check-in” time to
talk

Physical touch

Self-disclosure of similarities

Normalize feelings

Discuss life cycles

9-12 YearsRealizes irreversible nature of
deathRealizes the disruptive changes
that result

Wants black and white answers

Grief may be unrecognizable

Guilt

Withdrawal

May have physical symptoms –
headache, stomach-ache, etc.

Lack of concentration

Reluctant to admit feelings

Provide truthful answers – don't
shield

Assess areas of guilt

Acknowledge changes in routine

Connect with other peers who have
had loss

Suggest ways to release emotions

Make collage to represent loved one

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