



APPENDIX D

SPECIAL ISSUES: GRIEF AND MOURNING

Developmental Stages in Understanding Death

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The following should be used as a guide in understanding the developmental level of children, children's understanding of death, common grief reactions, and helpful approaches and interventions for all children. It is important to note that a child's perception of death cannot be fitted into a fixed aged category.

Although we accept that children's concepts develop in an orderly sequence, the rate of development may vary. A child's ability to understand the concept of death will largely depend upon his/her cognitive development. There are several other important considerations to keep in mind when providing explanations and interventions to children who experience grief and loss. These considerations are the child's: social, physical, emotional, religious, cultural, and personal experiences in understanding death. In addition, the reactions listed here are common grief reactions and may be demonstrated intermittently or continuously according to each individual child. It is also important to consider that there are children who react more severely and beyond normal grief reactions that may suggest that he/she needs further professional assistance. Making an appropriate referral for grief counseling should be considered. Use this guide as a basic developmental foundation to begin understanding children and to feel more comfortable when helping children through a normal grief process.

Infants and Toddlers (ages 0-2)

Children's Understanding

- Infants cannot understand death although can sense loss
- They react to the emotions of others
- The response of caregivers may upset the secure world of the infant
- Without language, their world is understood in terms of physical and emotional experiences
- Disruption is experienced by loss of physical contact and presence of parent.
- The infant will have little understanding of the loss, but as the child grows older they may seek to understand the event
- They are extremely observant of adults and will know something is wrong.

Reactions

- Crying, distress, crankiness, anxiety

- Irritable or vary in their eating or crying patterns
- Demand excessive attention from parents or caregiver
- Separation anxiety and clinging
- Temper tantrums
- Sleep disturbances such as nightmares
- Regression in behavior (i.e. toileting skills, language, walking)

Helpful Approaches/Interventions

- Provide consistent and secure routine as much as possible
- Provide physical, nurturing and loving contact
- Provide reassurance and emotional support
- Respond to unexplained reactions with care and understanding that something is wrong
- Be patient
- Provide simple and honest explanations
- Allow child to attend funeral with someone/relative who can provide individual attention to the child
- Remember that as the child gets older, he/she may ask questions about his/her involvement and want to know information about the death
- Be an advocate for the child during this difficult time.

Pre-School (Ages 2-6)

Children's Understanding

- Pre-school children think death is reversible, not permanent.
- They understand death is like sleep, you are asleep then you wake up. Or like taking a journey: you go away then you come back.
- Children this age are considered egocentric and can engage in magical thinking. They think that death was caused by a death wish or that anger may produce death.
- They may even think they might catch the same thing.
- They think the person who died lives underground and that they play and eat in the coffin.

Reactions

- Regressive behavior, show anxiety or aggressive behavior.
- Sleep disturbances or clinging.
- Fear being separated from parent or caregiver.
- Intermittent reactions, resume playing and then return to showing emotions.
- Talk openly about death openly and attempt to make sense of what it means.

Helpful approaches /interventions

- Use the right words. Simple and honest responses are usually best.
- Listen to their thoughts, images, and experiences.
- Hear their questions and respond appropriately.
- Prepare child for daily routine, and funeral activities and events.
- Explain why grown-ups are sad and crying.
- Provide reassurance, honest explanations and information.
- Use the words: dead and death. Do not say words such as: deceased, is sleeping, passed away, went away, resting, etc.
- Be a strong advocate for the child.

- Be open to discuss whatever comes up. Be honest and involve the child as much as possible. Do not protect the child from the realities of the death.
- Include the child in funeral rituals. Give the child the choice to attend.
- Provide suggestions to help find closure with the deceased, such as drawing a picture or giving a small gift and placing it in the coffin (gift ideas: a picture of themselves, a favorite toy, flowers).
- Make a memory/scrapbook of the deceased with the child.
- Read age-appropriate books.

School Age (Ages 5-9)

Children's Understanding

- The school age child is better able to understand the meaning of physical death. There is a curiosity regarding the biological aspects of death.
- They understand that death is final and that living things must die.
- They ask endless questions; are less inclined to magical thinking than the preschooler.
- Their reasoning remains concrete.
- The child can appear mature and logical but they still cope best with simple, honest, and accurate information.
- Death is perceived as final and frightening but still not universal.
- Death is personified as a separate person or spirit (i.e. skeleton, ghost or bogeyman)

Reactions

- School phobias, learning problems, aggression, withdrawal and sleep problems
- Become attentive and clinging
- Boys typically show an increase in aggressive and destructive behavior
- They may control expression of emotions
- Excessive guilt and denial are common for this age
- Attempts are made to appear normal and life going on as usual in the eyes of their peers
- Headaches, abdominal pain, crying, anxiety

Helpful Approaches/Interventions

- Provide reassurance and emotional support.
- Provide honest and appropriate responses and education.
- Include in funeral rituals, but do not force the child to attend.
- Allow them to talk about the death over and over if needed.
- Validate their feelings; acknowledge their pain and expression of emotions.
- Give them permission to cry, feel upset, angry, etc.
- Be a strong advocate for the child.
- Same basic interventions as those for the pre-school child would be appropriate.
- Help them to make a memory/scrapbook. Write a story about the person who died.
- Read age-appropriate books.
- Suggest placing a gift, drawing, small favorite toy, or objects in the coffin.
- Provide simple education about death and what it means.
- Be respectful of religious and cultural beliefs and mourning rituals

Adolescents (Ages 9-Up)

Children's Understanding

- They are able to view death on an adult level. They understand death to be a biological failure of organs to function.
- Adolescents see death as universal and inevitable.
- They will usually internalize feelings related to the death of a loved one.
- Like the school age child they distinguish reality from fantasy.
- Like all children they need encouragement to share their grief. They are more likely to have emotional, rather than cognitive difficulties in dealing with death.

Reactions

- Emotional reactions are often kept private at this age
- Unresolved grief in older children may lead to more serious behaviors such as drugs or alcohol abuse
- Acting-out behaviors, risk taking of various kinds are also common
- Depression, withdrawn
- Guilt, sadness, anger, denial

Helpful Approaches/Interventions

- Be a good friend, listener, and strong advocate.
- Include in funeral arrangements and rituals.
- Encourage communication.
- Be available and provide emotional support and reassurance.
- Suggest talking to friend, counselor, clergy, if needed.
- Provide education about normal grief reactions to future events (i.e. birthdays, anniversaries, and graduation).
- Suggest making a memory/scrapbook, writing poems, music.
- Journal writing.
- Provide appropriate books to read.

Six Basic Approaches For All Ages

- LISTEN TO CHILDREN. They need to talk, not just be talked to.
- PROVIDE SIMPLE EXPLANATIONS. Often over-answering reflects our own anxiety.
- BE HONEST. Complicated answers can result in confusion and distraction.
- DON'T BE AFRAID TO EXPRESS YOUR OWN EMOTIONS. Children receive permission to mourn from adults.
- BE PATIENT. Children express their grief in different ways and intermittently.
- CHILDREN DO GRIEVE. Remember that each child is unique and individual in their reactions and expression of emotions to grief and loss.

Guidelines for Intervention With Survivors of Fatal/Severe Family Violence

Death or permanent injury of a family member is not just another psychological issue. Counseling, funerals, grave visitation, memory books, family gatherings, and rituals for anniversaries must all be considered. Infants, toddlers, and “uninvolved” siblings have issues. Grief intervention or denial of grief and mourning can represent damageable or ominous conflict. The best intervention for some children and families may involve support and companionship for rituals. Counseling or therapy may be necessary for complicated grief.

1. Locate protocols and programs in your agency now, before you need them.
2. Read about this process. Try bookstores or special bibliographies.
3. Grief and Mourning is a natural process.
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5. An overwhelmed survivor is not automatically mentally ill.
6. Take your lead from the survivors. Listen for nonverbal cues.
7. The development stage of the child is critical. (Know human development).
8. Consider the entire “family,” e.g., friends, neighbors, and line staff.
9. Respect the culture and religion of the child and family.
10. Don’t censor pain with reassurance; respect the sense of loss.
11. Provide simple, honest explanations when asked.
12. Ask for help with your own pain. Don’t, hide it, and don’t impose it.
13. Let the child and family contact you in the future. Consider calling or writing them particularly on holidays and anniversaries.