



Monument Academy

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

Below are general guidelines for helping children who are grieving. This is not an all-inclusive list. If you see signs that concern you, it is always acceptable to seek counsel from a pediatrician or mental health provider.

- **Learn about your own feelings** around the issues of grief and loss. Children tend to react more to the grief around them than to the death. Understand what reactions or triggers you may have.
- **Educate yourself** about the process of grief.
- **Use the correct language.** Use specific words such as “died” or “killed”
- **Avoid using clichés** such as “...when you lost him” or “...went to a better place.”
- **Set aside regular time for the child** to come and talk.
- **Listen to the child.** It isn’t necessary to talk or to come up with answers. *Silence really can be golden!*
- **Don’t expect to give answers.** If you can’t answer a question, it’s okay to say, “I don’t know how to answer that, but maybe we can find someone who can” or “That’s a really good question. Let me think about it and get back to you.”
- **Accept and encourage the expression of feelings.** Help the child identify feelings and teach good coping techniques.
- **Ask questions.** “What are you feeling?” “What have you heard from your friends?”
- **Be objective and accepting** as the child shares thoughts and feelings with you. Monitor your reactions.
- **Be patient.** Grief takes time. There is no timeline for grief, and it can return suddenly with a memory, song or smell.
- **Watch for signs that may indicate complications:**
 - **grades dropping** for more than two weeks
 - **withdrawal** from school activities and/or friends
 - little or total **lack of emotion** regarding the loss
 - prolonged **inability to acknowledge the loss** that has happened
 - **change in health**
 - **prolonged depression**
 - **talking or writing about dying**

Developmental Milestones for Children and Grief

- Unlike adults, children are likely to appear devastated one minute and seemingly fine the next.
- Children are likely to lack the verbal skills to express what they are feeling.
- Grief will often be seen in a child's behavior and play activities.
- Children understand the loss differently at different developmental stages, and therefore it is normal for a child's grief reaction to appear to come and go over a period of years.
- Children may not express their grief while the adults are grieving, but may wait until their lives feel stable once again before reacting to the death.

- **Under Age Two**
 - Infants and toddlers will notice a change in caregivers' absence, moods or emotions
 - Tend to use behavior to communicate; expect to see behavioral changes in infants and toddlers
 - Children may be fussier and demanding, or perhaps even the opposite -- withdrawn.
 - Toddlers may regress, reverting to "babyish" behaviors they have outgrown.
- **2 to 5 years**
 - Tend to react more to the grief around them than to the death.
 - They see death as something reversible - as if the dead person has just gone out for milk.
 - It may appear that the child is not grieving, but this age does not view dying as final and so death does not carry the same impact as it does for an adult.
 - Remember that children communicate most with their behavior/play and we might see regression (backwards steps in behavior), tantrums, clinging and demanding behavior, overly energetic behavior, and/or just a child who is not herself.
- **6 to 12 years**
 - School-age children are very literal and extremely curious about death, accidents, illness, and other matters that the adults might prefer not to revisit.
 - There is a growing awareness of the permanency of death, but this age group does not typically feel the same impact of a death that an adult and still lacks a sense of finality.
 - We can expect grieving children to worry about safety and whether others may die, and show other fears and anxieties.
 - Expect grief to be on-off again. They will be hysterically sobbing one minute and off to play the very next; this is normal.
- **Teenagers**
 - Teens have an understanding that death happens to everyone and that it is permanent.
 - Their increasing ability to think abstractly means they will grapple with difficult existential questions (i.e., "What is the meaning of life? What happens after death?").
 - It is normal for death and grief to cause teens to question their psychological and spiritual beliefs.
 - This is a developmental period where teens are pulling away from family and forming new support systems - and so teens do not always have the best grief support systems in place.
 - Teens have a strong desire not to be different, and grief makes a teen feel different so it is normal for them to try and hide it, especially from peers.
 - Like younger children, teenagers typically express their grief with behavior and less with words, although older teens certainly have the verbal skills to share more about their grief.
 - *It is normal for grieving teens to become withdrawn, have difficulties with relationships, experience performance decline at school, and lack motivation in general.*

Sources:

http://www.helpwithgrief.org/development_and_grief.html

<http://www.sherisinykin.com/>