

# Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth–2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No understanding of death</li> <li>Child does not have words for feelings</li> <li>Aware of the absence of loved one</li> <li>Notices changes in routine</li> <li>Notices changes in family emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Longing</li> <li>Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one</li> <li>Fears of being abandoned</li> <li>Anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crying</li> <li>Sickness</li> <li>Indigestion</li> <li>Thrashing</li> <li>Rocking</li> <li>Throwing</li> <li>Sucking, biting</li> <li>Sleeplessness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance</li> <li>Maintain routines</li> <li>Meet immediate physical needs</li> <li>Include the child in the mourning process when possible</li> <li>Be gentle &amp; patient</li> </ul>
3-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No understanding of permanence of death</li> <li>To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip</li> <li>May wonder what deceased is doing</li> <li>Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible</li> <li>May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies</li> <li>Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fear</li> <li>Sadness</li> <li>Insecurity</li> <li>Confusion</li> <li>Anger</li> <li>Irritable</li> <li>Agitated</li> <li>Worried</li> <li>Guilty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regressive behaviors</li> <li>Repetitive questions</li> <li>Withdrawn</li> <li>Plays out scenes of death, change &amp; feelings</li> <li>Interested in dead things</li> <li>Acts as if death never happened</li> <li>Intense dreams</li> <li>Physical complaints</li> <li>Crying</li> <li>Fighting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow the child to regress</li> <li>Give physical contact</li> <li>Encourage children to play &amp; have fun</li> <li>Allow safe ways to express feeling</li> <li>Give simple &amp; truthful answers to questions</li> <li>Maintain structure and routines</li> <li>Answer repetitive questions</li> <li>Let the child cry</li> <li>Talk (reflective listening)</li> <li>Include child in family rituals &amp; mourning</li> </ul>
6-9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understands that death is final</li> <li>Interested in the biology of death</li> <li>Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation &amp; decay</li> <li>His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death</li> <li>Death is punishment</li> <li>Forming spiritual concepts</li> <li>Who will care for me if my caregiver dies</li> <li>Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sad</li> <li>Anger</li> <li>Lonely</li> <li>Withdrawn</li> <li>Worried</li> <li>Anxious</li> <li>Irritable</li> <li>Confusion</li> <li>Guilty</li> <li>Fear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regressive behaviors</li> <li>Specific questioning – looking for details</li> <li>Acts as if the death never happened</li> <li>Hides feelings</li> <li>Withdrawal</li> <li>Nightmares / sleep disturbances</li> <li>Concentration difficulties</li> <li>Declining or greatly improved grades</li> <li>Aggressive acting out</li> <li>Protective of surviving loved ones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow need to regress</li> <li>Give physical contact</li> <li>Have intentional times together</li> <li>Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>Watch for confusion</li> <li>Allow expression of feelings through verbal &amp; physical outlets</li> <li>Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports</li> <li>Let child choose how to be involved in the death &amp; mourning</li> <li>Find peer support for the child</li> <li>Work with school to tailor workload</li> </ul>

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Behaviors	How to Help
9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the finality of death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> <li>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</li> <li>• What if my caregiver dies?</li> <li>• Formulating spiritual concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Anxious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regressive behavior &amp; fluctuating moods</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Acts like death never happened</li> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Changes in grades</li> <li>• Talks about physical aspects of illness or death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.</li> <li>• Find peer support groups</li> <li>• Be available to listen and talk</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Offer physical contact</li> <li>• Give choices about involvement in death &amp; mourning</li> </ul>
12 years and up (teenagers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the finality &amp; universality of death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> <li>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</li> <li>• May sense own impending death</li> <li>• I need to be in control of feelings</li> <li>• If I show my feelings, I will be weak</li> <li>• Internal conflict about dependence &amp; desiring independence</li> <li>• May utilize spiritual concepts to cope</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Anxious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional regressive behavior</li> <li>• Mood swings</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Acts like death never happened</li> <li>• Acts out role confusion</li> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Changes in grades</li> <li>• Impulsive &amp; high risk behavior</li> <li>• Changes in peer groups</li> <li>• Fighting, screaming, arguing</li> <li>• Changes in eating patterns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>• Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.</li> <li>• Support relationships with understanding adults</li> <li>• Be available to listen and talk</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Share your grief</li> <li>• Watch for high risk behavior</li> <li>• Find peer support groups</li> <li>• Offer physical contact</li> <li>• Allow choices about involvement in death &amp; mourning</li> </ul>

