

## Children and Death

When a family member dies, children react differently from adults. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible--a belief reinforced by cartoon characters that "die" and "come to life" again. Children between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.

Adding to a child's shock and confusion at the death of a brother, sister or parent is the unavailability of other family members, who may be so shaken by grief that they are not able to cope with the normal responsibility of childcare.

Parents should be aware of normal childhood responses to a death in the family, as well as danger signals. According to child and adolescent psychiatrists, it is normal during the weeks following the death for some children to feel immediate grief or persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. But long-term denial of the death or avoidance of grief is unhealthy and can later surface in more severe problems.

A child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go; however, some service or observance is recommended, such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer or visiting a gravesite.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

The person who has died was essential to the stability of the child's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards the surviving family members.

After a parent dies, many children will act younger than they are. The child may temporarily become more infantile, demanding food, attention and cuddling, and talking "baby talk."

Younger children believe they are the cause of what happens around them. A young child may believe a parent, grandparent, brother or sister died because he or she had once "wished" the person dead. The child feels guilty because the wish "came true." Some danger signals to watch for:

- \* An extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events.
- \* Inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone.
- \* Acting much younger for an extended period.
- \* Excessively imitating the dead person; repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person.
- \* Withdrawal from friends.

\* Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school.

These warning signs indicate that professional help may be needed. A child and adolescent psychiatrist can help the child accept the death and assist the survivors in helping the child through the mourning process.

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## **Children's Understanding of Death**

It is important to understand a child's development level in order to talk about death in a language they will understand. Children need information, but giving them more than they can understand is not helpful. In fact, it may cause further confusion. To get a better understanding of what they already know about dying, ask the child questions. Encourage the child to talk openly and to ask questions also. The following list is a guide to children's developmental stages and reactions to death:

### **Under two years, a child...**

- Doesn't yet understand what death is
- Can sense feelings of adults
- Depends on nonverbal communications, needs physical care, affection, and reassurance
- Won't remember the deceased person

### **Three to five years, a child...**

- Views death as being temporary
- Questions the cause of death
- May feel the loss of someone loved as a punishment
- May have difficulty handling abstractions such as Heaven
- Feels sadness, but this emotion may be short lived
- May Regress
- May increase in aggression
- Often idealizes the lost person
- Gives up attachment to loved one and attaches to substitute people (teachers, neighbors, etc.)
- Escapes into play at times to relieve the reality of the loss; seems not to be reacting to loss
- May remember the deceased
- Needs reassurance, love, care, honesty, daily routine and structure

### **Five to ten years, a child...**

- Begins to conceive of finality of death
- Has a fear of death, of others dying
- Feels anger, guilt (blames self for death)
- Has difficulty expressing feelings in words
- Expresses feelings through behavior (exhibits compulsive care giving and good behavior, or demonstrates aggressiveness as a defense mechanism against feeling helpless)
- Asks concrete questions
- Identifies with deceased person as a means of hanging on to that person
- Still has difficulty comprehending abstractions such as heaven

### **Ten to 18 years, a child...**

- Recognizes irreversible nature of death
- May be troubled about own death
- May experience denial. May attempt to not think about it; may not want to talk about it
- May have fears of future
- May hide their feelings, may feel anger, may repress their sadness or be depressed
- May have somatic symptoms or may question religious belief