



Children and Grief

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Children are affected when a family member dies or a public tragedy occurs. As much as adults would like to shield children from loss we cannot. Adults need to understand children and child development to be able to help children cope with their grief. Very young children need stable routines and a lot of attention to recover from the loss of a loved one. Preschool children do not understand that death is permanent. They think that people and animals should be able to come back to life like the cartoon characters they watch on TV. Older children begin to understand that death is permanent but they – like many adults want to believe that it will never happen to them or anyone they know. Preteens and teens have conflicting and complex emotions about the death of a person they have known.

Children need support from survivors at the same time the survivors are coping with their own losses. Children suffer when their surviving parents or caregivers are disabled by their own grief and unable to cope with the normal responsibility of childcare. Other family, friends, and neighbors can lend emotional support to parents, siblings, and children at the time of a loss.

People sometimes question the value of a child's attending a funeral. Children need to say their own "good bye" to the departed. This may be accomplished by attending the funeral, holding a memorial service, planting a tree, visiting the grave, etc. Drawing, music or writing may be helpful for children who have difficulty expressing their strong feelings. Teachers can also play a role in helping children express the grief they are experiencing.

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. These feelings may be expressed as anger, depression, regression to younger behaviors, or withdrawal by children. 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.” Adults should be prepared to allow children to express their feelings at these times.

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.

If children show these signs for an extended time professional assistance may be required:

- A loss of interest in usual activities and friends
- Disturbances in eating and sleeping patterns
- Reverting to less mature behavior or withdrawing from others
- Wishes of being dead or with the dead person
- Loss of interest in school or a drop in school performance

If these signs persist, consult a pediatrician or school counselor. Children need help in working through mourning and continuing with their own growth and development.

References:

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