

Kids Can Cope with Death and Dying

If there has been a death in the world of your children, we hope that this will help you help them. Of course, no brochure or book can ever take the place of personal contact between you and your children, but the information and suggestions listed here may broaden your understanding of children in grief.

Children do mourn, but they go about it differently than we do. They also have lots of questions and worries but will often keep these to themselves if we do not open the door to their inquiring minds and hearts.

Death is part of life and coming to terms with it is part of the gift and challenge of being human. Don't underestimate your children's capacity to learn, understand and share with you.

Normal Grief Reactions of Children

Denial

Pretending or wishing the loss did not occur or acting as if they are unaffected.

Sadness

Crying constantly, at intervals or not at all; may have varying degrees of fatigue, hyperactivity or withdrawal.

Fear

Frequently showing concern about death, particularly their own and loved ones; expressing concern about their welfare and future caregiving; seeking contact and reassurance; clinging.

Anger

Toward others, self, God and the one who died; may be hidden or expressed through words or behaviors; increased sibling squabbles.

Guilt/Self Blame

Wishful thinking (if only . . .); regretfulness; asking the same questions repeatedly to gain reassurance and relief; secretly blaming themselves.

Regression

Returning to earlier level of functioning (bedwetting, seeking forgotten security blanket); usually turns around quickly with reassurance and the absence of criticism or judgment.

Physical Symptoms

Minor health complaints; change in appetite; change in sleep patterns (fear of sleeping alone, bad dreams).

Protection

Acting like little adults, hiding their grief in order to comfort and nurture the parent.

Insecurity

Refusing to go to school, increased possessiveness of people, pets and belongings; saving and/or hiding meaningful objects related to the one who died; testing of parents and teachers; seeking substitute figures; challenging limits.

Remember these are all **normal** reactions. They are part of the adapting and healing process.

Red Flags

The following are signs in children's behavior that may indicate a need for increased parental support or professional intervention. There are local resources available that specialize in children's grief. Remembering that each individual grieves and adapts to loss in his or her own way and time, we can say that *three months* or so after the death, we need to pay attention if these "Red Flags" appear or if the normal reactions continue unabated or increase:

- ✦ Wondering if they can join the dead person
- ✦ Giving away their possessions
- ✦ Withdrawing to the point of isolation
- ✦ Extended change in eating and/or sleeping habits
- ✦ Significant weight loss or gain
- ✦ Frequent nightmares
- ✦ Preoccupation with death, dying and/or illness of self or others
- ✦ Verbalizing despair ("I wish I had died instead of my sister")
- ✦ School troubles (changes in peer relations, classroom behavior and/or academic performance)
- ✦ Lying
- ✦ Destroying their own or another's property
- ✦ Deliberately hurting or wounding themselves
- ✦ Significant change in child's personality over time (quiet child becomes hyperactive or an outgoing child withdraws)
- ✦ Refusing to stay with formerly trusted adults
- ✦ Explosive behavior (rages, tantrums)
- ✦ Stealing
- ✦ Running away from home
- ✦ Significant health changes
- ✦ Becoming unusually rigid about everyday patterns

Some Suggested “Do’s” and “Don’ts”

Do’s

Do tell the child about the death and as many details as you feel are appropriate.

Do answer questions clearly and specifically.

Do learn about the normal reactions of children and be patient with them. They express their grief differently than adults.

Do talk about the person who died.

Do answer the questions of children. If you are too upset, find someone who will and can.

Do reassure children that you are still there for them and someone will always provide for their care.

Do allow for expression of feelings *without* judgment.

Do allow children to attend the funeral, if they wish.

Do prepare them for the funeral and explain what will happen.

Do give children private time to say good-bye, if they wish.

Do allow children to make or give a personal gift to the deceased, which will be buried or cremated with the person (picture or small gift).

Do keep as many daily routines as possible undisturbed.

Do allow children contact with beloved adults, such as neighbors, friends and family.

Do express your own grief openly.

Do use supportive people and groups in your environment.

Do ask for help for yourself and/or your child, if needed.

Do let all significant adults in your children’s lives know about the death (teachers, clergy, coaches and babysitters).

Don’ts

Don’t hide the truth.

Don’t keep children away from family gatherings and death rituals.

Don’t force a very upset child to go to funerals or to view the person who died.

Don’t block children’s wishes to talk and ask questions.

Don’t be surprised if children take their questions to someone outside the immediate family.

Don’t use confusing explanations or use euphemisms for death, because children take things literally (“Grandmother went to sleep”; “I lost my sister”)