



## Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death, and Grief

### General Reactions to Loss

There is no right or wrong way to cope with death, but there are some things that adults can do to help children work through this difficult time. Talking to children about death should be done in a way that is appropriate to the child's age level and their capacity to understand. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults around them as they try to figure out and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for pre-school and elementary age children, adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping the child's perceptions of the situation. The range of child reactions to death may include:

- *Emotional shock:* apparent lack of feelings, seemingly detached or distant
- *Regressive (immature) behaviors:* needing to be rocked, being clingy to adults
- *Explosive emotions and acting out behavior:* feelings of anger, frustration, helplessness
- *Asking the same questions over and over:* not because they don't understand, but because the information is so hard to believe or accept

### Developmental Phases of Understanding Death

A child's experience of death and loss varies depending on their age, maturity, spiritual beliefs, and cognitive skills. It is most important to accept their way of expressing grief, use words that they can understand, and meet them at their own level. Here are some general considerations:

Preschoolers: Young children may deny death as a real event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition ("mommy died, but she'll be back soon"). Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with causes of death.

Early Elementary School: Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that circumstances may result in death. However, they may not be able to separate reality from what they see on television or in movies. They may over-generalize ("If I don't go outside or near cars, then I won't die") At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.

Older Elementary: Children at this level have the ability to understand death as the final event in a permanent way. They may be guided by a concrete understanding of justice ("There has got to be a reason that he/she died") that conflicts with the growing realization that everyone dies. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions. Expression of feelings may be more physical or aggressive as they struggle with injustice, anger or despair.

Adolescents: Children at this age have a sense of invincibility. Being close to death makes some teens feel alive. They are interested in the "why" questions. They need adults more than they let on, but they prefer to grieve and talk with peers instead of adults. Problem-solving skills for teens may be compromised. It is important for adults to not judge whether pain is valid. Respect their grief and keep them safe.

## **How and What to Tell Them?**

- It is best to tell the children the truth with age appropriate language
- Tell them the truth about the reasons the person died
- Share that it is unusual for a child to die, but it does happen
- Be sure to ask the children if they have any questions
- Listen and be present (both physically and with your attention) for children

## **What to Do With Your Own Feelings?**

- Don't be afraid to let children see you cry or momentarily lose composure
- Your feelings can give permission to express their own
- Often children become more frightened when you try to hide things from them
- If children seem frightened by your feelings, you can explain that you feel very sad (or angry or frightened) but you will be okay
- It's a delicate balance – Be genuine about your feelings without overwhelming the child

## **Helping Children Cope**

The following tips are for adults who want to support children who have experienced a loss:

- Listen to them
- Be physically and emotionally with them
- Model the sharing of your own grief
- Provide normal structure and routine
- Maintain your rules for safety and behavior
- Provide time in the day for quiet time
- Allow children to express feelings through writing or drawing
- Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death the same way
- Encourage the children to provide comfort and understanding for each other
- Don't erase the presence of the person who died. Let children decide what they want done with the item or object (like a photo or a chair) - They may want to decorate it with pictures and cards, think about or remember the person, or simply be close to the object
- Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way
- Allow children to teach you about their grief experience
- Rather than worrying about what to say, focus on understanding what they are feeling and what they need

## **Just Do Your Best!**

There is no perfect way to handle grief. Death is hard for all of us, and it can stir up a lot of feelings. Be aware of your own need to grieve. Take breaks and get on-going support for yourself.

This document was adapted from information by:  
Archdiocese of New York Drug Abuse Prevention Program: [www.adapp.org](http://www.adapp.org)  
National Association of School Psychologists: [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)