

Grieving at different ages

Ages 2-4

"Is Grandma back from heaven now? I wanna call her and tell her to come back."

Preschoolers struggle to understand that death is permanent. In their minds, death is like going on vacation. Someone they love has left for a while, but they fully expect them to return. They also expect to have some kind of contact with the deceased, perhaps through phone calls, texts, letters or Skype.

They may react with sadness, but their predominant experience of grief is confusion and insecurity – a response to the emotional stress and upheaval they sense in their home. Outbursts of frustration or anger are typical too, as they struggle to understand why the one who died does not return.

In their confusion, youngsters may make false conclusions about causes of death, which can lead to seemingly irrational fears. For example:

- fear of germs or becoming ill, since "Grandpa died after getting sick"
- fear of hospitals, since "people die in hospitals"
- fear of travelling by car following a loved one's death in a car accident
- fear of sleeping after overhearing that a loved one "died in their sleep"

Common euphemisms such as "called home," "asleep in the Lord" or "we lost Grandpa" can cause all kinds of misunderstandings for children at this age, as they interpret such phrases literally. (Even young children should be told the truth about what has happened in brief, clear, age-appropriate explanations.)

Behaviors you might not anticipate:

- Frequent questions about the deceased, and a need to be told, many times over, that their loved one has died.
- Increased separation anxiety, clinginess, sleep disturbances and regression in their behavior – perhaps forgetting potty training skills, a return to thumb sucking, or insisting on sleeping with mom and dad.
- Irrational behaviors that interrupt everyday life. Parents should gently explore whether the child has incorrectly "connected the dots" between death and certain activities, leading to irrational fears.

Ages 4-9

"Where will we keep Uncle's body after they burn his coffin?"

During the early elementary years, children tend to personify death, thinking of it as a specific entity such as "the grim reaper" who targets a small number of unfortunate people. It hasn't yet occurred to them that everyone eventually dies. In their minds, they are immune to death themselves, or will somehow escape it.

It's normal for children in this age group to seem preoccupied with the subject of death. They are in a "fact-finding" phase, gathering intel about this confusing topic and struggling to figure out who is "likely to die" and who isn't. They may not yet realize that death is permanent, but they do perceive it as a separation. The prospect that they could be "separated" from mommy or daddy for some time generates anxiety about who would care for them in the interim.

Behaviors you might not anticipate:

- Questions about surviving loved ones' age (*How long until you die, Mommy?*) and their health (*Are you sick enough to die, like Grandma did?*)
- Uncomfortable questions about burial, cremation, and what happens to the body and the soul. It's important to give simple, truthful answers to these questions. Youngsters who are left to "fill in the blanks" for themselves often internalize all kinds of mistaken and extremely

frightening ideas. A common misperception is that their loved one is going to be buried alive or burned alive.

- Around the ages of four to seven, watch closely for signs of false guilt. It's not unusual a child to conclude that they are somehow responsible for the death. For example, they might think, *I was mad at my baby sister because she cried so much, and now she is dead. I made her die.*

As an extension of this erroneous thinking, a child may also conclude that they deserve to be punished for causing the death, sometimes exhibiting uncharacteristically bad behavior to elicit "the punishment they deserve." Alternatively, they may expect that exemplary behavior on their part will somehow bring their loved one back.

Ages 9-12

"My friend's mom has died. I hope he won't have to move away."

Preteens understand that no one escapes death, including themselves, and they have begun to contemplate eternity, heaven, and hell. They may need lots of reassurance as they begin to realize their own mortality. When faced with news of a death, preteens may seem fixated on details about the incident and/or the practical ramifications of the loss. They often feel pressure to appear mature or to "stay strong" for the sake of others and may crack jokes or feign nonchalance to hide their unease.

Behaviors you might not anticipate:

- Questions that may seem a bit clinical, insensitive or inappropriate. They may ask questions like *Was there a lot of blood?* or *Will their family have to move now?* Their many practical questions are often prompted by anxiety about the future (in the light of the loss), or a need to feel "back in control" of their life.
- Fierce anger targeted at others for irrational reasons. For example, statements like, *If he hadn't had to pick you up from soccer, Dad wouldn't have had the accident.* Remember that underlying all that anger is a whole lot of despair or worry. (Similar behavior may show up in other age groups as well.)

Teens

Many teens are afraid of death but are reluctant to discuss their fear. It's common for teens to disguise their fear or to behave recklessly to help them beat their fear or regain a sense of control. Conversely though, plenty of teens take risks because they are certain "it won't happen to me."

Behaviors you might not anticipate:

- Sharing thoughts and emotions about a deceased loved one with friends rather than with their parents.
- Resistance to talking about their loss to "protect parents from further pain."
- Skipping school, becoming defiant and/or engaging in reckless behavior.
- Turning to substance abuse, developing an eating disorder, or sinking into depression under the burden of grief plus other stresses of adolescence.

Helping Children Cope with Grief: Remember the CHILD.	
C-Consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique situation of the child • His/her developmental capacity to understand • His/her concerns, thoughts, feelings, and relationship to his/her sibling
H-Honesty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the "d" words: death, die, dying • Realize that it is all right to not have all the answers • Avoid euphemisms • Avoid words such as gone away or went on a trip • Do not explain to a child that the dead person is sleeping
I-Involve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the child know what is happening; if possible, before the death occurs • Give the child factual knowledge about the cause of death – especially the school-age child • Involve the child in saying good-bye to the dying and deceased – allow the child the choice to participate in the funeral to the level at which he/she is comfortable
L-Listen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concentrate on discussing the stumbling block of the moment • Let the child talk through what is on his/her mind

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the child know that it is all right to not want to talk to anyone anymore about the death for a while • Give the child outlets for expressing his/her grief – art, drawing, play, writing letters, poetry, stories, hammering • Be aware of thoughts and fantasies children may have of being reunited with the person who has died • Careful attention to any suggestion of suicidal risk, no matter what the age of the child • Clarify that death is NOT the result of the child’s action or thoughts; be attuned to magical thinking involved in the child’s explanation of the death and correct it to avoid guilt and inappropriate grief reactions
<p>D-Do it over and over again</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriately share your grief; realize that children cannot do grief work without permission and role models • Children need to see an honest expression of emotions from adults • Keep in mind the developmental capacities of the child and his/her age-related concerns and needs

Source:

Davies, B., & Orloff, S. (2004). Bereavement issues and staff support. In D. Doyle, G. W. C. Hanks, N. Cherny and K. Calman (Eds.). *The textbook of palliative medicine* (3rd ed., p. 838). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission of Oxford University Press in the format Copy via Copyright Clearance Center.

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