

Grief and Bereavement in Children

Birth to Six Months				
Characteristics of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Basic needs must be met, cries if needs aren't met.</p> <p>Needs emotional and physical closeness of a consistent caregiver.</p> <p>Derives identity from caregiver.</p> <p>View of caregiver as source of comfort and all needs fulfillment.</p>	<p>Has no concept of death.</p> <p>Experiences death like any other separation - no sense of "finality."</p> <p>Nonspecific expressions of distress (crying).</p> <p>Reacts to loss of caregiver.</p> <p>Reacts to caregiver's distress.</p>	<p>Progressively disengage child from primary caregiver if possible.</p> <p>Introduce a new primary caregiver.</p> <p>Nurturing, comforting.</p> <p>Anticipate physical and emotional needs and provide them.</p> <p>Maintain routines.</p>		
Six Months to Two Years				
Characteristics of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Begins to individuate.</p> <p>Remembers face of caregiver when absent. Demonstrates full range of emotions.</p> <p>Identifies caregiver as source of good feelings and interactions.</p> <p>There may be changes in sleeping, eating and mood.</p>	<p>May see death as reversible.</p> <p>Experiences bona fide grief.</p> <p>Grief response only to death of significant person in child's life.</p> <p>Screams, panics, withdraws, becomes disinterested in food, toys, activities.</p> <p>Reacts in concert with distress experienced by caregiver.</p> <p>No control over feelings and responses; anticipate regressive behavior.</p>	<p>Needs continual support, comfort.</p> <p>Avoid separation from significant others.</p> <p>Close physical and emotional connections by significant others.</p> <p>Maintain daily structure and schedule of routine activities.</p> <p>Support caregiver to reduce distress and maintain a stable environment.</p> <p>Acknowledge sadness that loved one will not return - offer comfort.</p> <p>Keep routines and physical setting as familiar as possible.</p> <p>Provide constant nurturing. If parent is too distraught, seek a caring adult substitute.</p>		

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Two Years to Five Years				
Characteristics of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Egocentric</p> <p>Cause-effect not understood.</p> <p>Developing conscience.</p> <p>Developing trust.</p> <p>Attributes life to objects.</p> <p>Feelings expressed mostly by behaviors.</p> <p>Can recall events from past.</p>	<p>Sees death like sleep: reversible.</p> <p>Believes in magical causes.</p> <p>Has sense of loss.</p> <p>Curiosity, questioning.</p> <p>Anticipate regression, clinging.</p> <p>Aggressive behavior common.</p> <p>Worries about who will care for them.</p> <p>Fear that dead people may be cold or hungry in the grave.</p> <p>May have frightening dreams.</p> <p>Children may play out the events surrounding the death. Children this age will take words literally. Since children have limited experiences, they make sense of the world by connecting events that don't relate. For example: Aunt Sally died from a headache. Daddy says he has a headache. Maybe he will die, too.</p>	<p>Remind that loved one will not return.</p> <p>Give realistic information, answer questions.</p> <p>Involve in "farewell" ceremonies.</p> <p>Encourage questions and expression of feelings.</p> <p>Look into the child's eyes and touch the child gently when discussing a death.</p> <p>Shorten time away from the child. Be sure he knows where you are and how to reach you.</p> <p>Avoid words such as <i>sleeping, resting, loss, passed away, taking a long trip.</i></p> <p>Talk about what it means to be dead in concrete terms such as <i>someone doesn't breathe, eat, go to the bathroom or grow.</i></p> <p>Repeat simple, honest explanations as often as the child asks.</p> <p>Reassure the child of his own safety and your plan for continued presence. Share that most people die when they are older.</p> <p>Allow expressions of feelings such as drawing pictures, reading, and telling stories about death or the loved one, or reenacting the funeral service.</p>	<p>Does not understand the permanence of death or causal relationships, therefore asks repeatedly when parent is returning for weeks or months after death.</p> <p>Is frightened by prolonged, powerful expressions of grief by adults.</p> <p>Wants a "whole family" like other children in preschool. Demands a replacement, "Next time, get two daddies in case you lose one again."</p>	<p>Severe and persistent separation anxiety from the surviving parent more than 6 months after the death if a predictable home life has been established.</p> <p>Continuing or worsening regressive behavior (e.g., loss of toilet training) beyond 6 months after the death.</p>

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Five Years to Nine Years				
Characteristic of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Attributes life to things that move; may fear the dark.</p> <p>Begins to develop intellect.</p> <p>Begins to relate cause and effect; understands consequences.</p> <p>Literal, concrete.</p> <p>Decreasing fantasy life, increasing control of feelings.</p>	<p>Personifies death as ghosts, "boogeyman."</p> <p>Interest in biological aspects of life and death.</p> <p>Begins to see death as irreversible.</p> <p>May see death as punishment; may feel responsible.</p> <p>Problems concentrating on tasks; may deny or hide feelings, vulnerability.</p>	<p>Give clear and realistic information. Include child in funeral ceremonies if they choose.</p> <p>Give permission to express feelings and provide opportunities; reduce guilt by providing factual information.</p> <p>Maintain structured schedule, individual and family activities; needs strong parent.</p> <p>Notify school of what is occurring, gentle confirmation, reassurance.</p>		
Nine Years to Eleven Years				
Characteristics of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Concrete operational thinking improves logic and understanding of cause and effect.</p> <p>Cannot draw inferences from insufficient information</p> <p>Needs detailed explanations about illness and course of treatment.</p> <p>Able to use compartmentali-zation</p>	<p>"Just give me the facts!"</p>	<p>Assure him that the person didn't die because he was "bad."</p> <p>Talk about the ways in which things are different and how they are the same.</p> <p>Reassure the child he did not cause the death.</p>	<p>Needs to balance avoidance of sadness with planned rituals for reminiscing.</p> <p>Increasing expression of anger.</p> <p>Parent is mourned as mentor, coach, buddy, friend, cheerleader, advocate.</p> <p>Not uncommonly feels a sense of the parent's presence.</p>	<p>Shunning of peer involvement.</p> <p>Persistence of or newly reduced academic or after school activity and competence.</p> <p>Increasing moodiness, anger, or misbehavior 3 to 6 months after the death.</p>

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Early Adolescents: Twelve to Fourteen Years				
Characteristic of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Experiences pubertal physiological changes.</p> <p>Formal operational thinking is inconsistent.</p> <p>Ambivalent about dependence and independence.</p> <p>Withdraws emotionally from parents; girls place more emphasis on altering relations with parents.</p> <p>Egocentrism.</p> <p>Acceptance by peers is extremely important.</p>	<p>"I cry in my room-alone!!"</p> <p>Preteens have a better understanding of the permanence of death. Some children in this age range may appear to be unaffected by death on the surface. They may see death as a punishment for bad deeds.</p>		<p>May be egocentric and callous toward ill parent's disability and needs, especially when they interfere with peer activities.</p> <p>After death mourns parent as adviser, guide, social and gender role model, family organizer, helpful limit setter.</p> <p>Has strong sense of the dead parent's presence and describes ongoing conversations with him or her.</p> <p>May have intense desire to wear clothes and hold possessions of parent who died.</p>	<p>School refusal, persistent anhedonia, or depression, starting drug or alcohol use, shifting to a more delinquent group of friends, precocious sexual behaviors.</p> <p>Persistence of physical symptoms without underlying cause, more so if symptoms lead to reduced school or peer activity.</p>



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Middle Adolescents: Fifteen to Seventeen Years				
Characteristic of Age	View of Death & Response	What Helps	Uncomplicated Bereavement	Complicated Bereavement
<p>Uses formal operational thinking more consistently.</p> <p>Shows greater integration of future with present and past.</p> <p>Less ambivalent about independence.</p> <p>Develops more intimate individual supportive relationships with peers. Has become more thoughtful, allocentric, and empathic toward family's needs but struggles when demands in the home are excessive.</p> <p>Boys emphasize separation from parents; girls maintain relations with parents but alter them.</p>	<p>"So much has changed, nothing will ever be the same again."</p> <p>Teens have an adult-like understanding of the finality of death and realization that everyone will die. They may inappropriately assume responsibility for adult concerns, such as family and financial well-being.</p> <p>Teens may assume the roles of the deceased person or deny feelings and express anger which creates added pain.</p> <p>Teens feel confused, responsible, helpless, angry, sad, lonely, afraid, or guilty.</p> <p>Anger directed at a variety of people – self, parents, others, the person who died, siblings. Guilt and grief stem from the anger as do feelings of responsibility.</p>	<p>Talk to the teen without criticizing or judging.</p> <p>Express your own feelings about the death.</p> <p>Guard against letting the teen assume adult responsibilities and reassure him of his roles.</p> <p>Reassure the teen that he did not cause the death.</p> <p>Continue to support and listen to the teen's feelings although he may appear to be handling it.</p> <p>Allow time for solitude and reflection. Be available to talk on the teen's time frame.</p>	<p>Easily overwhelmed by surviving parent's emotional dependence, concerns, and grief.</p> <p>Grief has adult characteristics of overwhelming sadness and painful memories, but its duration is shorter.</p> <p>Fears an inability to handle future independence.</p> <p>Is intolerant if surviving parent is excessively dependent.</p> <p>Worries about own genetic vulnerability.</p> <p>Mourns the dead parent for specific personality characteristics and for an important believer in adolescent's ability to function independently.</p> <p>Has private dialogues with the dead parent.</p> <p>Expresses interest in fulfilling the parent's dreams for the adolescent.</p>	<p>Persistence of adult-like grief beyond 6 months, development of more marked mood swings, withdrawal from peer interactions, persistent poor academic competence, or withdrawal from other group activities. Persistent or increasing high-risk behaviors with drugs, sex, and antisocial activities.</p>

Source:

Fine, P. (Ed.). (1998). *Processes to optimize care during the last phase of life*. Scottsdale, AZ: Vista Care Hospice, Inc.

<https://every1dies.org>

