

When Children Grieve

Our children's first encounters with grief and loss are very significant. How a child deals with this experience may begin to establish a pattern in his or her life – a map for how the child will persevere through and accommodate difficulties, how he or she will respond to their own needs as they grieve and how they will respond to others.

Grief is the process that follows significant loss. Grief is not one feeling or emotion, but rather a complicated mix of emotions that each serve to move the individual through a healing process, resulting in adjustment and accommodation to the loss.

We know that children are deeply affected by the loss of a loved one. While children may understand intellectually that all people can die (and ultimately will), the reality of the death is very unsettling. There are signs and symptoms that a child may be experiencing grief:

- ❖ Trouble falling asleep or waking during the night
- ❖ Little appetite or difficulty finishing meals
- ❖ Attention span issues and inability to focus or concentrate
- ❖ Fretfulness and dependent or regressive behavior – using “baby-ish” vocabulary, thumb-sucking, toileting issues, reluctance to self-care (washing or dressing)
- ❖ Hyperactivity
- ❖ Irritability
- ❖ Separation anxiety – reluctance to be separated from parents, or work alone

It is important to **watch for changes** in your child's disposition or behavior, as these are the most significant indicators that a child is struggling. Children may also have a lot of questions about how a death occurred, why it happened, and what happens now, especially to the body. **It is best to answer questions honestly**, with a level of detail that responds to the question the child actually asked. It is generally true that a child needs an answer to a question he or she is capable of asking. Answering the question – and not expanding on it until the child asks for more detail or information – will help alleviate their anxiety.

Children often ask questions repeatedly and we may be convinced the child does not understand our responses – but that is often not the case. Sometimes young children ask questions over and over to test whether or not the answer will remain the same. Understanding such big concepts is not easy and children may need time to absorb the information we provide for them. **Understanding is a process of learning and incorporating information, accomplished over a period of time.**

There are several things that parents can do to help children through the experience of early grief. The first thing is to **pay attention to their concerns and questions:** attempting to distract a child from these issues will usually result in raising their anxiety or sending the message that such issues are not to be talked about – neither outcome being helpful. If we see our children struggling, it is best to approach the subject and model for them that talking about difficult, frightening, or sad things is a good way to deal with them.

The second thing is to **respond compassionately**, recognizing that this is not the time for new challenges or strict adherence to all the rules. We maintain the structure of their everyday lives and schedules but watch for signs that they are not managing as well as they usually do and then provide support – cuddling, talking, smaller meals more often, extra reading at bedtime, making sure there is some playtime or “downtime” in their schedules.

When we talk to our children openly and honestly, answer their questions, and treat them with compassion and understanding they will navigate through their early experience of grief. They will begin to develop their own “map” – the way they will move through the many life experiences that are grief journeys. They will know what to do for themselves and how to do for others as well. They will be resilient, able to persevere through loss.