

Helping a Child After a Death: Tips for Parents

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According to recent studies, approximately 90% of students will experience the loss of a close or special person before finishing high school. All children deal with death differently, and often take their cues on how to cope from the adults around them. Here are some tips for helping children successfully cope with death.

Bereavement Reactions by Age Group

- Young children (2-5 years) may:
 - Think their thoughts or wishes caused the death
 - Think death is reversible
 - Revert to earlier behaviors
- Older children (6-9 years) may:
 - Understand that death is final
 - View death as contagious
 - Regard death as a “person”
- “Tweens” (10 -12 years) may:
 - Place high importance on friends & peers
 - Be inquisitive, seeking out information
- Adolescents (13 years +) may:
 - Exhibit a more adult-like understanding of death
 - Have guilt due to pulling away from the family
 - Engage in risk-taking behavior

What should we look for?

- Being afraid to go to sleep
- Rejecting friends, withdrawing, acting out
- Having difficulty separating from parents
- Crying excessively and frequently
- Bullying or becoming a class clown
- Engaging in reckless physical action
- Worrying excessively about health issues
- Having headaches and stomach aches
- Lacking concentration

Things to keep in mind:

- Remember that grieving is a process.
- Don't lie or tell half-truths. Telling a child that the deceased person is sleeping or on a trip will only lead to confusion later.
- Listen to children after they've experienced a death. They may *need* to talk about their feelings.
- Keep in mind that grief work is hard for children, too, and they work through the process at their own pace. There's no “right” amount of time to grieve.
- Be aware of your own need to grieve. Focusing on your child is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. Some will need to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

Useful books for children on grief include:

When Dinosaurs Die (Brown & Brown, 1996)
When Someone Very Special Dies (Heegaard, 1988)
Honoring our Loved Ones: Going to a Funeral (Carney, 1999)
Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids (Wolfelt, 2001)

Useful books for grieving teens include:

Death is Hard to Live With (Bode, 1993)
When a Friend Dies (Gootman, 1994)
Facing Change (O'Toole, 1995)

For further assistance, contact your school psychologist, a counselor, or The Bethany Center for Grieving Children at (863) 968-1707 or (800) 464-3994.

Adapted from material posted on the National Association of School Psychologists website.
www.nasponline.org