

Children's Developmental Responses to Death

Seven-to Fourteen-Year-Olds

First- through third-graders are just beginning to view death as final. They know that death can happen to young and old and that death has many different causes, but they don't believe that it will happen to anyone they love or to them. They have an active fantasy life and are often curious about what happens to the body after death. They may also personify death as a person, like the "bogeyman," and think they can hide from him. First- through third-graders may still be able to describe seeing, hearing, or smelling the person who has died. Once they start to transition over into the adult world, they may experience the person who died more in their dreams.

Third- through eighth-graders are making the transition into the adult view of death. They understand that death is final and irreversible. They are also curious about death and what happens to the body, but they are beginning to have a better understanding of biology and how the body works. They may begin by thinking that death is connected to being bad, and then later begin to see that people died for different reasons. They may, however, still believe that their thinking caused the death (as in "wishing" their brother dead) or that they could have prevented an accident from happening. They may find it difficult to concentrate on their grades slipping. They may lack energy to go out with friends or participate in their extracurricular activities. That is a normal part of grieving because of the emotional energy required to heal. You may find them "acting out" their grieving or regressing to previous behaviors they had as young children such as becoming afraid of the dark, throwing tantrums, having nightmares, clinging, thumb-sucking, wetting the bed, or being afraid of new places and new experiences. They may become aggressive and rebellious and become the "bad" child, thinking they somehow deserve to be punished. Or they may try to become the "perfect" child. Both are ways to try to overcome the helpless feeling they are experiencing. They may be fearful about who will take care of them, what will happen if the other parent dies, where will the money come from, etc.

As a physical expression of their fears, they may talk nonstop or hoard toys or food in trying to gain some control over their lives. They may have difficulty sleeping and difficulty with eating. They may experience headaches, stomachaches, rashes, symptoms of the illness the person who died had, difficulty breathing and aggravation of their allergies.

What you can do:

1. If the children are curious about what happens to the body after death, give them concrete answers: "The body cannot breathe or walk or talk anymore." Sometimes what they dream up in their head is scarier than reality. Relate the dying to nature and how all things have to die at some time. You can talk to the child about the "spiritual body" that goes to heaven when a person dies.
2. Children may report to an adult that they have spoken to a loved one who is dead. They are often told, "You can't be talking to Grandma. You must be hearing things." These experiences, however, can be wonderful and comforting for children, and unless they feel openness in the adults around them, they probably won't want to talk about it.
3. Ask your child to pray for the person who died and share memories together about the person, sad and happy.

4. Children grieve in cycles or “doses.” Don’t be surprised if the child is sad and crying one minute and the next minute she or he is out playing. They can only take so much at a time.

5. If your child thinks that she or he “wished” the person dead or could have somehow prevented the death, reassure her or him that being angry and having thoughts about that person dying didn’t cause the death. If the child feels guilty, thinking she or he could have somehow prevented the death, help her or him go through the events before the death and look at the reality of the situation. If the child feels guilty because the loved one died before she or he could apologize after a fight, have her or him write a letter to that person. Pray with the child, asking God for forgiveness and asking the person who died to forgive the child. Sometimes writing a letter to the person who died provides a good release of emotions and sense that the person is listening. Burning the letter can have a powerful effect on the child as a symbol of her or his thoughts going up to the person who died.

6. Reassure her or him that she or he will be taken care of, that you are in good health (if you are), that there will be enough money for clothes and food and toys (if there is), etc.

7. Withdrawing from people and depression can be natural part of the grieving process. But if you observe constant sadness, extreme withdrawal from family and friends, severe anger or listlessness, or use of alcohol or drugs, especially if persistent, seek professionals who are knowledgeable in the area of grieving.

8. “Acting-out” behaviors and rebelliousness need attention. Telling your child to “grow up” or “straighten up” when you see regressive behaviors will not help. All these behaviors are normal, and it is a way for children to deal with their sense of helplessness. Instead, listen to them, acknowledge their scary feelings, their guilty feelings, their sad feelings, even their feelings of relief (especially after a long illness) and tell them about your own feelings.

9. Model “good grieving.” Show children that it’s okay to cry and feel sad when you talk about the person who died. Tell them it’s okay to have angry feelings that the person who died had to leave so soon, etc. Don’t assume they don’t want to talk about the person who died because it will upset them. At points, it may seem that’s all they want to talk about. Let them talk for hours if they need to. Restate in your own words what your child is saying to let her or him know you are listening: “You’re angry that daddy had to die.” Don’t immediately rush in and try to make them feel better. Your gift of listening will aid in their recovery.

10. Buy your child a notebook or journal in which to write down her or his thoughts and feelings. Putting emotions down on paper is very therapeutic. (Your bereavement minister can provide a set of reflections that may be useful in journaling.)

11. Emotions during this time may run high, and children’s feelings will fluctuate from being sad, to being silly with their friends, to angry, etc. Your child may not be sure how to feel. Reassure her or him that she or he is not going crazy. It’s a normal part of the process of grieving.

12. Try not to push the child into a premature adult role by suggesting that she or he become the “woman” or the “man” of the house. The child may need to do extra chores to help out, but she or he shouldn’t have the responsibilities that the person who died had.

13. If you can't think of anything to talk about or your words don't seem to be coming out right, just hold or hug your child. She or he needs to feel your physical support.

14. Acknowledge physical reactions to grieving such as the stomachaches, headaches, etc. If they are having trouble sleeping, try using relaxing music or progressive relaxation. If they are having trouble eating, don't force them. Rashes, stomachaches, headaches, etc., will eventually go away. Explain to them that these are normal reactions that many children have after someone has died. Reassure them that they are normal and okay.

15. Read to them or get them books to read on grieving.

16. If a children's support group is available in the area, sign them up, if it's okay with them. Being around other children who have had someone die is a very comforting and "normalizing" experience.

17. Let your child know it's okay to laugh. Children may think that they didn't love the one who died or that they are being disrespectful if they can laugh. Remind your child that it's okay and that she or he may need to take a break from mourning.

18. Let your child have something that belonged to the person who died. A piece of clothing that smells like the person, favorite piece of jewelry, a painting, etc., will acknowledge that you thought of the child.

19. Accept your child's friends. They can help your child sort out feelings, keep your child company, and keep her or him busy. One exception, of course, is if you suspect your child's friends of aiding your child through buying alcohol or drugs, which will interfere and delay the grieving process.

20. If your child is away at school, try to include her or him in the funeral services. A child's grieving process may be extended if she or he isn't able to participate.