

Grief

Helping your child cope with death

It is normal for children to feel grief when someone close to them dies. It is also normal for young children to think the person is really still alive, especially during the first several weeks following the death.

Young children don't quite understand death. They often see death as temporary and reversible. Many cartoon characters seem to die, but then come back to life.

After age 5, children begin to see death as permanent. But they still have a hard time believing it will happen to them or to anyone they know.

Coping with a death in the family can be difficult for children. One reason is that family members are overcome with grief themselves and may not be available to care for the child's emotional needs.

It is important to help your child deal with his or her grief. Avoiding grief or long-term denial of a death is not healthy.

On Back

What you can do to help a grieving child.

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You & Your Child



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Understand the stages of dealing with loss

A child's behavior may be affected by a death. Children often go through these basic stages when dealing with a loss:

- Denial. Children may be shocked and not understand their loss. They may escape into fantasy as a way to handle the pain.
- Anger. When reality sinks in, children may look for someone to blame, including the deceased.
- Guilt. Some children blame themselves for their loss. Some try to bargain with God to bring back the deceased.
- Acceptance. When grieving is successful, children accept reality and begin adjusting.

Do not force children to attend funerals

Children can benefit from attending funerals, but they should not be forced to go. They don't quite understand death. Forcing a child to attend a funeral may make it difficult for them to cope with grief.

As an alternative, do something else to observe the death. For example, you can light a candle for the deceased, or you and your child can visit the gravesite together.

Sympathize with an angry child

Your child may feel anger at the loss of a loved one. He or she may show this anger as rough play or being irritable toward other family members.

Let your child tell you about his or her anger. Sympathize with their feelings.

Assure children the death is not their fault

Young children tend to believe that they control everything that happens around them. They may believe that a death is somehow their fault.

Listen to your child's feelings. If your child is feeling guilty, provide assurance that he or she did not cause the death.

Discuss the death with your child

Talking about a death will help your child deal with grief. Here are some suggestions:

- Point out that death happens to everyone at some time. Use examples from nature to help your child understand.
- Say it is okay to wish that the deceased could come back.
- Say that feelings of anger and blame are normal. Help your child express those feelings.

Don't frighten your child

When talking to your child about a death:

- Don't say the deceased is sleeping. It is not true and young children may begin to fear going to sleep.
- Don't say that the deceased is not really dead. Help your child accept reality.
- Don't say that God took the dead person. You want your child to think of God as a source of comfort, not as an enemy.

Watch for danger signs

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry offers some danger signs to watch. Consult your doctor if your child:

- Is depressed for a long period, during which time he or she loses interest in daily activities.
- Has trouble sleeping, a loss of appetite over several weeks, or has a fear of being alone.
- Acts much younger for an extended period.
- Repeatedly talks about wanting to join the dead person.
- Withdraws from friends.
- Refuses to go to school or shows a sharp drop in school performance.

