

Child Development and Grief:

Pre-Schoolers: (ages 3-6)

Death is thought to be of as temporary and/or reversible. Death is seen like sleeping. Dead person continues to live and function in some ways. Dead will come back to life.

Grief Responses:

Believe dead person or loss live on only under changed circumstances. For example: on a cloud or in a city called Heaven or in a box under ground connected to other boxes by tunnels.

They may show increased clinginess, regressed behaviors, separation anxiety, sleep problems, eating problems, bladder and bowel control, fear of abandonment, tantrums, anger and aggressiveness.

Asks many questions (How does he eat? How can she go to the bathroom? Is he cold?

Tips for Responding:

Preschool children are very concrete and literal in their thinking. We must be careful with the words we choose when talking with them. They may ask the same questions over and over to gain reassurance the situation has not changed.

Answer concretely and lovingly. Be honest. Don't tell half-truths.

Death play is fine and helps children integrate the reality of the death. You may want to join in and offer your guidance.

Provide them with terms for some of their feelings: sad, mad.

Short term regressive behaviors are normal. Offer your presence and support.

Children this age express themselves through play. Give them play opportunities. Toys, including doctor bags, toy ambulance, clay, art, sand box, dolls

Middle Childhood: Ages 6-8

A clearer understanding of death and loss develops. Death is believed to be a person or spirit (skeleton, ghost, bogeyman). Death is final and frightening. Death happens to others but not to me.

### **Typical Grief Responses:**

Children continue to express their grief primarily through play. They may “hang back” socially and scholastically.

May act out because they don’t know how to handle their grief feelings, more aggressive behaviors.

Curious about death. Ask specific questions. May have exaggerated fears about school.

May have concerns about imaginary illnesses. (Movie My Girl)

It’s not unusual for a 7-year-old who lost her mom three months ago to annoy her peers at recess, or at day care following school. She can’t keep her hands to herself and may disturb the other children around her. They have their thoughts more available than their feelings. They may appear cold and insensitive.

### **Tips for Responding:**

Use play throughout middle childhood as well. Children need permission to concentrate on mourning before they can be expected to forge ahead with the rest of their lives. They need time.

Set the same concrete limits on their behavior as you did before the loss, however do it with more kindness. Specifically check in with young children often to ask how they feel and to comfort them.

Offer constructive “venting” alternatives. Support groups can be very helpful.

Ways to vent include punching a pillow or punching bag, tearing up old phone books, writing feelings in a letter or journal, screaming into a scream box, popping bubble wrap.

### **Ages 9-12**

More understanding of death, dying and loss. They know death is final and universal and even know that they will die. However, like us, they hope death will be delayed as long as possible. They are interested in the biological aspects of death (i.e. is grandma a skeleton now? Are worms eating grandpa’s body? They are interested in rituals and how the world will change for them because of this death or loss. They tend to intellectualize death, and dying -this is their way of coping. They see death as a video game monster and they know they can’t win.

### **Typical Grief Responses:**

Heightened emotions, sadness, lonely, afraid, guilty, anger, shame, grief. Increased anxiety over their own death. Mood swings. Fear of refection, not wanting to be different from peers. Changes in eating and sleeping habits. Regressive behaviors, loss of interest in outside activities. Impulsive behaviors. Feel guilty about being alive (especially related to death of a

sibling or peer). May worry about how death (especially of a parent) will affect the family financially and security.

### **Adolescents: Ages 12 and up**

Understanding death and loss cognitively but are only beginning to grapple with it spiritually and psychologically. Sometimes we need to be careful and not assume just because kids this age are getting older and look more grown up that they can handle themselves and their problems. Don't assume that. Teens need help and support to understand their feelings during times of loss.

#### **Typical Grief Responses:**

May protest the loss by acting out and/or withdrawing.

May feel life has been unfair to them, act angry.

May act out a search for meaning. May test their own mortality.

Adolescents have an adult understanding of death and loss, but the actual death/loss shatters their view of immortality or invincibility. They often engage in risk taking behavior seeming to test the limits of that immortality and invincibility- that nothing bad will ever happen to them or their friends. When a friend or loved one dies or leaves they are outraged. Unlike preadolescents, adolescents can be highly emotional and may respond by sobbing, angry outbursts and destructive behavior. They don't want to feel different from their peers and may be embarrassed by the death of a parent or sibling (or divorce, parental addiction or disability).

#### **Tips for Responding:**

Acting out behaviors should be tolerated if the teen or others are not being harmed.

Withdrawal is normal in the short-term. (Long-term withdrawal is a sign the teen needs extra help).

A teen's normal egocentrism can cause him to focus exclusively on the effect the death of loss has had on him and his future. After he has had time to explore this issue, encourage him to consider the loss's impact on the larger social group- family, friends, etc.

Teens begin to really explore the "why" questions about life and death and loss. Encourage this search for meaning unless it may harm the teen or others.

Adolescents need to grieve with their friends and ritualize in their own way. Although they may not be sharing their grief with adults, it is extremely important that the adults in an adolescents' life are there for them- to care for them, support them, listen to them, acknowledge and validate their feelings and experiences.

### **What You Can Do:**

**Toddlers:** Be honest, answer questions, explain what death is, explain some feelings they may have, remind them they didn't cause the death, involve them in the funeral, let them know they will be taken care of

**6-9:** Answer questions, be honest, explain feelings, talk about fears, involve the child in the funeral

**10-12:** Be honest, answer questions, explain feelings, provide a journal, offer TLC, understanding and support, involve them in the funeral service

**Teens:** Talk openly about feelings, encourage teen to talk to teacher or school counselor, encourage them to journal or draw, create rituals of memory, tell them what you need, let them tell you what they need

### **Explaining Death to Children:**

Something that can be explained clearly and gently to any child. Best when a parent delivers the news. Older children will have questions about details. Younger children need a simple explanation.

When people die, all their body parts stop working. They don't feel or think anymore. They don't hurt. They don't breathe in and out. They don't eat anymore, and they don't go to the bathroom. They are not sad or scared or happy. They are dead.

Dead is not at all like sleeping. When you sleep, all your parts work. You dream and you wake up in the morning. A dead person never wakes up. The dead person's body will feel different too. The body will be cool and solid. The part of the person that laughed and lived is gone now. What is left is just the body, like a schoolhouse without any children, like a peanut shell without the peanut.

### **What Bereaved Children Want Adults to Know About Grief:**

1. Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences.
2. Don't assume every child in a certain age group understands death the same way or has the same feelings.
3. Healing in grief is a process, not an event.
4. Don't lie or tell half-truths to children.
5. Don't wait for one big tell all to begin to help children understand death.
6. Encourage children to ask questions about death.
7. Don't assume that children always grieve in some kind of orderly and predictable way.
8. Let children know that you really want to understand.
9. Don't misunderstand what may seem to be a lack of feelings when someone loved dies.

10. Allow children to participate in the funeral.
11. Don't forget about the concept of magical thinking.
12. Remember that feeling relief doesn't mean a lack of love.
13. Realize that children's bodies react when they experience grief.
14. Keep in mind that grief is complicated.

### **Helping Grieving Students**

Form a crisis intervention team.

Speak to a student about their loss. Understand the nature of feelings and teach this understanding to your students. Help peers to show that they care.

Say, "I am sorry your father died- it's okay to cry here- I am here if you want to talk. If you need to go to the counselor's office, let me know. This must be a difficult time for you. We missed you while you were gone. It is hard to find words, but I was sad to hear your news. How can I help- what would help you now?"

Listen

Be understanding

Be consistent

When a student writes or speaks of a loss either aloud or in writing make time to address the loss individually

Give students outlets for grief

Reach out to family

### **When Death Impacts the School:**

1. Talk to the student before he/she returns to school
2. Get permission to talk to class about the loss when appropriate and talk about how grief affects people in different ways, and encourage the peers being supportive
3. Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to class
4. Provide a way for your class to reach out to the grieving classmate and his or her family
5. Provide flexibility and support to your grieving students upon his or her return to class. (Pass that doesn't expire, a plan when grief triggers hit)

### **Don'ts:**

Don't suggest student has grieved long enough. Don't indicate the student needs to get over it or move on. Don't act like nothing happened. Don't say things like, "It could be worse" or "You still have a brother" or "I know how you feel" or even "You'll be stronger after this is over."

Don't expect student to finish all their assignments on a timely basis.

### **Talking to Young Children about Specific Deaths:**

**Old Age:** When a person gets very, very, very old, his body wears out and stops working.

**Terminal Illness:** Because sometimes a disease can't be stopped even by doctors and nurses and medication. The person then got very, very sick and his body wore out and stopped working.

**Accident:** A terrible thing happened (car crash, a fall) and her body was very badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working.

**Miscarriage:** Sometimes when a baby is just starting to grow something happened that makes it stop. We don't know what it was, but it wasn't anything anyone did...

**Stillborn:** Sometimes something makes a baby die before it is born. We aren't sure why but it isn't anything anyone did or didn't do.

**Sudden Infant Death Syndrome:** Sometimes with little babies something makes their bodies stop working. It is nothing anyone did or forgot to do. Doctors still aren't exactly sure why.

**Suicide:** (Absolutely know it was) Some people's bodies get sick and just don't work right; and sometimes a person's brain or mind doesn't work right. They can't see things clearly and they feel the only way to solve their problems is to take their lives- to kill themselves. However this is never a solution to problems; the only reason they did it was that they weren't thinking clearly.

**Suicide (Questionable)** Sometimes people take pills to relax or go to sleep. Sometimes they forget how many they took and think they need more. These pills make a person's body slow down. Too many pills can make a body stop working completely. We don't think the person wanted to die, but that is what happened.

**Homicide:** Sometimes very bad people do very bad things.

### **How Children Understand Death:**

#### **Concept 1. Death is Irreversible**

On TV, video games, movies characters come back to life. Even our smart phone "dies" and we can charge it back to life. Many children think the person has gone on a trip for a while therefore find no reason to mourn.

#### **Concept 2. All Life Functions End at the Time of Death**



We tell them that their loved one is “watching over them” or to place a picture in the casket or to write them a letter. This can be confusing to children. They fear the deceased will be afraid...

#### Concept 3: Everything that is Alive Eventually Dies

Children often believe that they and those close to them won't ever die. Parents often reassure children that they will always be there to care for them. They wish to shield children from worry. After a death, children worry who else will die. They struggle to make sense of death. They often assume it is their fault in some way. That lead them to feeling guilt.

#### Concept 4: Death is Caused by Physical Reasons

Children need to understand the real cause of the person's death or they will make up an explanation that could cause guilt or shame.

#### **Factors to consider when a student has suffered a loss:**

Age of child

Personality of child

Coping skills

History of prior difficulties

Available support systems

Type of death

Relationship with deceased

#### **Other factors:**

How well the family functions: history of emotional closeness and open communication can usually offer more consistent support. If a parent has mental illness, addiction, prior trauma or there is a lot of discord at home, may take longer.

Parent coping skills: Most parents don't have experience helping their children cope with a death of a close family member, such as parent or sibling. Important to know of resources to suggest such as: Good Grief, Imagine, Common Ground Grief Center, The Alcove, etc.

Provision of warmth: Children who feel connected to and loved by their family feel supported

Coping skills of children: Some have better skills than others.

Nature of the death itself: Traumatic, sudden, depending who the person was to the child, if there is shame for the family or secrets around death, if the media was involved, can make it more difficult.

**Specific Challenges for Teachers:**

Children may not realize that their teachers or school counselors are available for discussion about the death.

Children may be reluctant to start conversations about death at school.

Conversations may feel too personal.

**Being with Grieving Children:**

Be present and authentic

Listen more, talk less

Avoid trying to "cheer up" students or their families

Allow emotional expression

Demonstrate empathy

Stop harmful reactions when safety is a concern

**What Not to Say:**

"I know exactly how you feel"

"You must feel...." ("Instead say I wonder what this is like for you")

"I know this must be difficult, but it's important to remember the good things in life as well."

"You need to be strong now for your family."



## Preventing Trauma and Encouraging Growth After Trauma:

### BE SENSITIVE TO:

- Acknowledge that not all kids grieve the same
- Beliefs of the griever need to be respected
- Cultivate an attitude of openness and acceptance of differing customs and traditions
- Develop appreciation for diverse grief responses
- Express condolences thoughtfully, mindful of the beliefs of the griever
- Foster a relationship with the griever that is built on trust and respect
- Gender differences in expressions of grief vary from culture to culture
- Have images and resources reflective of people from diverse backgrounds readily accessible and visible in your school
- Inquire about ways in which you can best support the griever, if unsure
- Know your student population
- Learn about cultural differences in responses to loss
- Model genuine, compassionate, and nonjudgmental behavior
- Value diversity
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### Psychological and Emotional Attributes Associated with Resilient Children:

- Above average verbal skills
- Cognitive and problem-solving abilities
- Positive self-esteem
- A value for others
- Ability to self-regulate behavior (bounce back)
- Positive expectations about the future
- The ability to ask for help
- Willingness to use social support

Resilience can be learned. Greatest teachers are the adults in their lives: parents, guardians, related family members, teachers and so many others. **Here are some ways to teach resilience:**

- Being empathic
- Treating children in ways that make them feel special
- Teaching responsibility, compassion and generosity
- Infusing hope and patience
- Introducing children to stories of those who overcame major challenges
- Encouraging interest in making mistakes while providing a physically and emotionally safe environment in which to explore and take risks.

- Recognizing strengths and deficits
- Providing opportunities to build strengths
- Identifying and reinforcing areas of competence
- Teaching children to problem solve and discover choices that are available to them
- Remaining calm when children are anxious and stressed

**Rituals:** symbolic activities or ceremonies that hold special meaning for the person or group engaging in them. Ritual provides a meaningful structured activity that allows individuals space, time and support to recognize, respond to and absorb a significant change.

**Rituals of continuity** commemorate the bond or continuing connection between the survivor(s) and the deceased. Such things as planting a tree or creating a photo collage are examples.

**Rituals of transition** mark the passage from one phase of life to another. A funeral is a ritual of transition, as are such acts as removing a wedding band or relocating.

**Rituals of reconciliation** allow the survivor(s) to finish unfinished business. Such things as asking for or expressing forgiveness and letter writing exemplify this.

**Rituals of affirmation:** honor the life and contributions of the deceased through expressions of acknowledged and gratitude.

#### **Books:**

The Grieving Student by David Schonfeld

A Child's View of Grief: A Guide for parents, teachers and counselors by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

Helping the Grieving Student by The Dougy Center

When Death Impacts Your School: The Dougy Center

Working with Grieving and Traumatized Children and Adolescents by William Steele

When Kids are Grieving: Addressing Grief and Loss in School by Donna Burns

When a Friend Dies by Marilyn Gootman

When Dinosaurs Die by Marc Krasny Brown

The Grieving Teen and The Grieving Child by Helen Fitzgerald