

Supporting Grieving Children & Teens



Developmental Age:

Developmental Response to Grief:

Ways Adults Can Support:

Ages 2-5

Children at this age often believe death is reversible and not permanent. May ask questions about when they will see the person who died.

They may believe that their thoughts or actions caused the death.

Grief expression may be intense but brief. They return to baseline quickly.

May have separation anxiety or exhibit regressive behaviors.

Use simple, honest answers. To explain death to children this age you can say the heart stops working, the lungs stop breathing and that you will no longer see the person who died.

Be prepared to repeat answers.

Model healthy coping by talking about memories of loved one.

Remind child that he/she is safe.

Provide opportunities for expressive play. For example, art and physical play such as throwing a ball.

Ages 6-11

Children at this age more clearly understand that death is permanent.

They may be more curious and ask specific questions about the death.

Use simple, honest answers. To explain death to children this age you can say the heart stops working, the lungs stop breathing.

Provide creative outlets to express feelings.

Ages 12-18

Children and teens at this age have a lot of changes going on developmentally.

Peers are very important to teens.

Encourage the expression of all feelings.

Answer questions honestly.

Assist teens in finding support that includes peers.

Try not to put too many adult responsibilities on teens. For example: taking care of younger siblings.

General Suggestions:

Be honest, use accurate words. Such as death, etc. Using other words may cause confusion.

Talk about loved one who died, share memories and stories.

Validate feelings. It is okay to cry as well as feel angry. All feelings are okay. It is also okay for adults to show different emotions in front of kids. It models healthy coping.

Celebrate loved one's life, so children know that he/she will not be forgotten.

For further support visit:

www.hvmi.org/basis

References: The Dougy Center, The National Center for Grieving Children & Families
Portland, Oregon

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