

Understanding Children's Grief

Normal Grief Reactions

A list of normal grief reactions is given to parents. This list is also provided to campers.

- Grief affects us:
 1. Emotionally
 2. Cognitively
 3. Behaviorally
 4. Physically
 5. Spiritually

Tasks of Mourning

- Accept reality of the death.
- Experience the pain of grief.
- Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing.
- Withdraw from the deceased emotionally and reinvest in life, living and new relationships.

Helpful Guidelines

All of the children and adolescents attending Camp Good Grief have suffered the loss of a loved one. Some have lost a father, mother, brother, sister, grandparent or cousin. Some experienced the death recently, and for some it has been a long time ago. We must treat each of them as individuals.

The following guidelines are to help you work more effectively with the campers.

Listen

Many just need to talk and tell their story. "Listen" to their non-verbal messages as well as verbal ones; often no response is needed, and they just need to know you care.

Empathize

Do not sympathize. They do not want you to feel sorry for them, just understand. Do not judge their feelings but accept them. Anger, relief, guilt, sadness are all common reactions.

Focus on "Feeling" Statements

- Use "I" statements and encourage the campers to do the same.
- Provide emotional support: Hugs are more than okay at this camp.

- Allow and encourage the campers to support one another. It will mean more than anything we do.
- Let each camper decide what he or she wants to share with others. Nothing is required, and some may only want to listen. They should never feel forced to talk about something they do not want to talk about.
- Utilize active listening tools i.e. "reflection".

Common Feelings, Thoughts and Behaviors of the Grieving Child

Child's Journey through Loss

- Childhood bereavement is quite different from adult bereavement.
- A bereaved individual continues adjusting to the loss through each developmental level, until the mid twenties.
- The range of emotions recur over and over throughout the different developmental stages. At each developmental stage, a child is reminded of the lost loved one and the hopes and expectations that have been shattered.
- No one reacts to significant loss in exactly the same way, though there are common reactions.
- Most children exhibit some grief responses, yet seldom all of them.
- The intensity of their reactions to a loss and its duration varies with each child and is influenced by their age, ability to anticipate loss, understanding the concepts of permanence and death, reaction of the surviving caregivers, and quality of their relationship with the person who died.
- A compassionate adult must be available to take a child's hand and walk the grief journey with her/him until early adulthood.



DiCiacco, Janis A. PhD. 2008. *The Colors of Grief: Understanding a Child's Journey through Loss from Birth to Adulthood*. UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Ages 3 – 5

- Think that what happened might only be temporary (ex. Death is reversible)
- Temper tantrums
- Regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, bed wetting)
- Clinginess
- Crying
- Repeated questions
- Nightmares
- May grieve, then play, then grieve, then play
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)
- Retells events of the deceased's death and funeral

Helpful Responses

- Simple, repeated explanations
- Truth and "I don't know"
- Use words such as dead and died- Death means the body no longer functions.
- Avoid passed away and asleep- children may become scared of sleep
- Secure, loving environment and nurturing assurances
- Physical comforting
- Active (attentive) listening, acknowledging feelings, events
- Draw, read books and play together

Ages 6 – 9

- Children begin to have a clearer understanding of death & realize that death is final.
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Nightmares
- Questions about causes and consequences
- Interest in things associated with death
- Decline in grades
- Attention and focus becomes difficult
- Increase energy
- Increase silliness
- Regressive behaviors (bed wetting)
- Avoid focus of the loss/death.
- When loved ones die, children at this age often feel it is a punishment for their own bad thoughts or behaviors.
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)

Helpful Responses

- Truth about cause, circumstances, answering questions using simple, honest words and phrases
- Acceptance and assurance
- Reassurance of your love
- Assurance, explanations, plans
- Give choices to participate
- Keep routines
- Listen, acknowledge & validate
- Provide memorializing activities and allow the child to plan
- Teach acceptable ways to release emotions

Ages 9 – 12

- Realize that death is irreversible, universal, and inevitable.
- Curious about biology of death
- Young people begin to realize their own mortality.
- Nightmares
- Grades may decrease
- Concentration decreases
- Attempt to decrease feelings, trying to act like it didn't happen
- Anger & frustration
- Sleep disturbances
- Regressive behaviors
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)
- Worry about others health or others dying
- Increase action to take on parental roles

Teenage Years

- There is more of an acceptance of feelings of immortality, & the realization that life is fragile.
- Worry about future
- Lack of concentration
- Nightmares
- Impulsivity
- Risk taking
- Attempt to decrease feelings, trying to act like it didn't happen
- Sleep problems
- Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches, etc.)
- Feelings of not fitting in
- Feelings of isolation
- Regression to a less mature state
- Eating changes
- Academic difficulties
- Turn to peers
- Increase action to take on parental roles

Helpful Responses

- Be truthful, direct and honest (with age appropriateness)
- Listen, accept, acknowledge, support, reassure, allowing them to vent their feelings.
- Reassurance about future and any plans
- Do not make promises you may not be able to keep
- Maintain routines
- Offer physical outlets (punching bag, drawing, ripping up paper)
- Help make connections with peers who have experienced similar losses
- Monitor social activities
- Encourage keeping belongings of the loved one
- Turn to peers
- Increase action to take on parental roles

Helpful Responses

- Be honest
- Offer support and encouragement, helping the teen to understand there are no "shoulds" with regard to their feelings.
- Explore thoughts and feelings about the deceased/loss.
- Share grief
- Respect privacy
- Listen
- Avoid power struggle
- Increase environmental structure
- Pace homework and tasks
- Provide opportunity to talk with non-family members
- Identify clear roles expected at home to alleviate acquiring parental roles
- Monitor risk behavior