

# Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth–2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No understanding of death</li> <li>• Child does not have words for feelings</li> <li>• Aware of the absence of loved one</li> <li>• Notices changes in routine</li> <li>• Notices changes in family emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longing</li> <li>• Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one</li> <li>• Fears of being abandoned</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Sickness</li> <li>• Indigestion</li> <li>• Thrashing</li> <li>• Rocking</li> <li>• Throwing</li> <li>• Sucking, biting</li> <li>• Sleeplessness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance</li> <li>• Maintain routines</li> <li>• Meet immediate physical needs</li> <li>• Include the child in the mourning process when possible</li> <li>• Be gentle &amp; patient</li> </ul>
3-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No understanding of permanence of death</li> <li>• To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip</li> <li>• May wonder what deceased is doing</li> <li>• Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible</li> <li>• May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies</li> <li>• Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Irritable</li> <li>• Agitated</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regressive behaviors</li> <li>• Repetitive questions</li> <li>• Withdrawn</li> <li>• Plays out scenes of death, change &amp; feelings</li> <li>• Interested in dead things</li> <li>• Acts as if death never happened</li> <li>• Intense dreams</li> <li>• Physical complaints</li> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Fighting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow the child to regress</li> <li>• Give physical contact</li> <li>• Encourage children to play &amp; have fun</li> <li>• Allow safe ways to express feeling</li> <li>• Give simple &amp; truthful answers to questions</li> <li>• Maintain structure and routines</li> <li>• Answer repetitive questions</li> <li>• Let the child cry</li> <li>• Talk (reflective listening)</li> <li>• Include child in family rituals &amp; mourning</li> </ul>
6-9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands that death is final</li> <li>• Interested in the biology of death</li> <li>• Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation &amp; decay</li> <li>• His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death</li> <li>• Death is punishment</li> <li>• Forming spiritual concepts</li> <li>• Who will care for me if my caregiver dies</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Withdrawn</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Anxious</li> <li>• Irritable</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Fear</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regressive behaviors</li> <li>• Specific questioning – looking for details</li> <li>• Acts as if the death never happened</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares / sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Declining or greatly improved grades</li> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Protective of surviving loved ones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow need to regress</li> <li>• Give physical contact</li> <li>• Have intentional times together</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Watch for confusion</li> <li>• Allow expression of feelings through verbal &amp; physical outlets</li> <li>• Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports</li> <li>• Let child choose how to be involved in the death &amp; mourning</li> <li>• Find peer support for the child</li> <li>• Work with school to tailor workload</li> </ul>

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Behaviors	How to Help
9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the finality of death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> <li>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</li> <li>• What if my caregiver dies?</li> <li>• Formulating spiritual concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Anxious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regressive behavior &amp; fluctuating moods</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Acts like death never happened</li> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Changes in grades</li> <li>• Talks about physical aspects of illness or death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.</li> <li>• Find peer support groups</li> <li>• Be available to listen and talk</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Offer physical contact</li> <li>• Give choices about involvement in death &amp; mourning</li> </ul>
12 years and up (teenagers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understands the finality &amp; universality of death</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</li> <li>• Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</li> <li>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</li> <li>• May sense own impending death</li> <li>• I need to be in control of feelings</li> <li>• If I show my feelings, I will be weak</li> <li>• Internal conflict about dependence &amp; desiring independence</li> <li>• May utilize spiritual concepts to cope</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Lonely</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Guilty</li> <li>• Isolated</li> <li>• Abandoned</li> <li>• Anxious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional regressive behavior</li> <li>• Mood swings</li> <li>• Hides feelings</li> <li>• Acts like death never happened</li> <li>• Acts out role confusion</li> <li>• Aggressive acting out</li> <li>• Withdrawal</li> <li>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbances</li> <li>• Concentration difficulties</li> <li>• Changes in grades</li> <li>• Impulsive &amp; high risk behavior</li> <li>• Changes in peer groups</li> <li>• Fighting, screaming, arguing</li> <li>• Changes in eating patterns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</li> <li>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</li> <li>• Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm</li> <li>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.</li> <li>• Support relationships with understanding adults</li> <li>• Be available to listen and talk</li> <li>• Answer questions truthfully</li> <li>• Share your grief</li> <li>• Watch for high risk behavior</li> <li>• Find peer support groups</li> <li>• Offer physical contact</li> <li>• Allow choices about involvement in death &amp; mourning</li> </ul>