

# Early Loss: The Roots, the Foundation of Grief

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The roots of the Grief Tree represent the profound and often unseen impact of childhood grief. Just as roots anchor and shape the growth of a tree, early experiences of loss create the emotional foundation from which children navigate the world. These early encounters with death or separation are often marked by confusion and fear, as children grapple with a concept that feels both incomprehensible and deeply personal.

## Immediate Reactions: A Child's First Encounter with Loss

When a child experiences the death of a parent or primary caregiver, their immediate reactions may include shock, confusion, sadness, anger, and behavioral changes. Without the language or developmental capacity to fully express their grief, children may act out through withdrawal, regression (returning to earlier behaviors like bedwetting or clinginess), or heightened anxiety. Some may appear unaffected initially, only to display emotional distress later through nightmares, difficulty concentrating, or unexplained physical complaints like stomachaches and headaches.

## Developmental Understanding: How Age Shapes Grief

A child's understanding of death evolves with their cognitive development:

- **Ages 0–5 (Pre-School Years):** At this stage, children view death as temporary or reversible, often struggling to grasp its permanence. Magical thinking may lead them to believe their thoughts or behaviors caused the loss, resulting in feelings of guilt.
- **Ages 6–12 (School-Age Years):** Children begin to understand that death is final but may still have misconceptions. They might personify death (e.g., the "boogeyman") and worry about their own or loved ones' safety. Academic struggles and social withdrawal are common signs of hidden grief.
- **Ages 13–18 (Adolescence):** Adolescents have a more mature understanding of death but often struggle with the unfairness and existential weight of loss. Their grief may manifest as anger, risk-taking behaviors, or deep sadness masked by isolation.

## How to Help

- **Use Simple, Honest Language:** Avoid euphemisms like “gone to sleep” or “passed away,” which can confuse young children. Instead, gently explain that death means the person’s body has stopped working and they won’t return.
- **Validate Their Feelings:** Let children know it’s okay to feel sad, angry, or confused. Phrases like *“It’s okay to miss them,”* or *“I’m here with you when you feel sad”* help them feel safe expressing emotions.
- **Maintain Routines:** Familiar routines provide a sense of stability when everything else feels uncertain. Even small rituals like bedtime stories or regular mealtimes help foster security.
- **Encourage Expression Through Play and Art:** Children often express what they cannot say through drawing, storytelling, or imaginative play. Provide materials and a safe space for them to create.
- **Answer Questions Repeatedly and Patiently:** Children may ask the same questions multiple times as they try to make sense of the loss. Patient, consistent answers support their cognitive processing.
- **Model Healthy Grief:** It’s okay for children to see adults cry or talk about their sadness. This normalizes grief and shows them that feelings can be expressed safely.
- **Honor Their Memories:** Engage in simple rituals such as lighting a candle, creating a small memory box, or celebrating their loved one’s life in age-appropriate ways.
- **Seek Professional Support When Needed:** If a child shows signs of prolonged distress, extreme withdrawal, or behavioral challenges that disrupt daily life, a grief-informed therapist can provide critical support.