

When Children Mourn



Death is a part of life that affects even very young children. The emotional pain of a child who has lost a loved one makes it tempting to avoid the subject or to try to distract the child. But avoiding talking about the loss or saying that the person is asleep or on a trip could confuse the child or lead to distrust. Though you cannot shield children from grief, you can help guide and comfort them.



Preschoolers have a limited understanding of death.

Most children under 5 think of death as temporary. Television characters or cartoon figures often are seen to die and reappear. After being told Grandmother is dead, they may ask, “But when will I see her again? Where has she gone?” Children may believe that their own naughty behavior caused the deceased person to leave or that the person could return if she wanted to. This limited understanding of death can lead to anger and increase the feeling of abandonment, particularly if a parent or caregiver is the one they have lost.



Preschoolers react to the grief of those around them.

Crying is common when young children see sadness in others. However, because preschoolers live in the present, they seem to overcome sadness quickly. The grief can return as they notice a difference in their lives and come to realize the person is not coming back. Regression to less-mature behavior, such as toileting accidents, temper tantrums, or clinging to a comfort object, is common at times like these.



Adults can help.

You can reassure grieving children by telling them that they are loved and that they are not responsible for the death. They will need to hear this over and over as they grow. Parents can share their beliefs about what happens after death. If a parent has died, be sure the child knows who will take care of him. He may be afraid that he or another loved one will die. Reassure him that most people do live to an old age and he will continue to be loved and cared for. Let him know that it is all right for him to laugh and play and feel happy again. As much as possible, maintain the child’s routines: mealtimes, bedtimes, and preschool schedule.



Try reading children’s books that deal gently with death.

Two titles to consider are *I’ll Miss You, Mr. Hooper*, by Norman Stiles (1984, Random House), and *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*, by Judith Viorst (1971, Antheneum). Your local children’s librarian may have other suggestions.



Some children need more help.

Consider counseling for a child who continues mourning over an extended period. Be concerned if the child shows little interest in daily activities, doesn’t sleep or eat normally, continues to show regressive behavior, loses interest in friends or play, talks of joining the deceased, or refuses to attend her usual child care program or preschool.



For related Web resources, see “When Children Mourn” at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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