

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. Though you cannot shield children from grief, you can help guide and comfort them.

-  **Preschoolers have a limited understanding of death.**
Most children under age 5 think of death as temporary. 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 behavior caused the person’s death. This limited understanding of death can lead to anger and feelings of abandonment, particularly if they have lost a parent or caregiver. Be sure to use concrete words when talking about death and avoid telling them the person is asleep because it may cause the child to fear going to sleep.
-  **Preschoolers react to the grief of those around them.**
Crying is common when young children see sadness in others. They may also try to comfort adults who are upset. Talking about memories or looking at pictures can help both adults and children process their grief.
-  **Be prepared for the ups and downs of grief.**
Because preschoolers live in the present, they seem to overcome sadness quickly. However, the grief can return as they 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. 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.
-  **Read children’s books that deal gently with death.**
Your local children’s librarian may have suggestions of age-appropriate books to read to your child.
-  **Some children need more help.**
Consider counseling for a child who mourns 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 <https://illinoisearlylearning.org/tipsheets/>**

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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