

A RESOURCE
FROM
NACG
MEMBERS



DEVELOPMENTAL UNDERSTANDINGS

For Very Young Children, Children & Teens



Young Children (Birth to 5 years old)

Understanding and Response to Death

- Awareness of death is directly influenced and limited by young children's ability to understand their world.
- Death is viewed as the absence of a parent or caregiver.
- Children may be preoccupied with who will take care of them.
- Children may see themselves as responsible in some way, for a death, and they do not yet recognize time and irreversibility of death.
- Child may want to "die" to be with the person who died.
- Repetition is important with younger children, they may repeatedly be asked the same questions.

Sources of Support

As caregivers, you are the primary source of security for your children— your continued reassurance about your presence and support is crucial. Extended family members and others may also provide important support, and you can discuss with them how they can be helpful.

What They May Need from Caregiver(s)

Be a good listener. In all your communication, be sure to listen to what your child is experiencing and feeling and show you understand.

Establish and maintain routines. Offer reassurance about the predictability of events, family security, and routines.

Recognize very young children do not understand death as adults do. When appropriate, gently explain what is happening. You can provide gentle repeating of the facts, knowing time will help the child understand their loss.

Respond truthfully. When asked questions, respond truthfully about death according to your own belief system and what the child can understand at the time. To be truthful does not mean you have to share all of the details at one time.

Model grieving. When a child sees you being sad or express sadness or other emotions, explain what you are thinking and feeling; sadness is only one way people show they miss someone who has died.

Allow and encourage children to play and have fun when they want to.

Reassure children they are safe and cared for. Describe and reassure the child your family will experience new routines and they will be safe and cared for. One way to do this is to establish family life routines and special times to be together.

Talk about the person who died. Give children opportunities to learn and share about their person. Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died.

Encourage art activities. You might ask preschool children to draw a picture showing a memory of their person. Follow up by asking them to tell you about the picture.

Be assured that regressive behavior is natural. This happens when a child no longer does things they could before the death, such as potty training. When a child shows regressive behavior, show patience and understanding.

Include and allow the child to be as involved as they want to be. Ask the child how they want to participate: pick out the color of the flowers, draw or color a picture to be placed in the casket, choose a photo to share, etc.



For additional resources, visit www.childrengrieve.org.



Children (6 years old to 12 years old)

Understanding and Response to Death

- Awareness of death is influenced and limited by the child's ability to think about their world.
- Many emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Explain grief is a combination of reactions one can have after someone has died—thinking about the person, feelings of sadness or anger, physical reactions such as tiredness, or upset stomach. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be the anger children feel because the person has died, but the anger that results when no one listens or talks to them or includes them in activities. Do not assume what prompts feelings, ask them.
- Children recognize death is irreversible.
- Children will be able to appreciate how the loss of a person in their lives will affect them over time, weeks, or months but may not understand the long-term, life-long impact of a death.

Sources of Support

Although school and outside of their family worlds are increasingly important, caregivers and family are still the school agers' primary source of support. Use outside resources, as you need, to be sure your child is receiving the support they need.

What They May Need from Caregiver(s)

Be a good listener. Encourage their expression of what they are thinking and feeling, their concerns about their alive caregiver's health, financial issues, etc. Provide acceptance and reassurance as needed.

Respond to the child's need for information about the death, often the details, allowing them to build a sense of control. They may have a matter-of-fact reaction rather than an emotional one to the circumstances. Give factual answers to questions as best you can, such as how it happened, when, and where. The "whys" of the death may not even be understood by adults, and you can share this with the child.

Recognize children do not want to be different from other children because of the death. Provide the support they need to continue their ongoing activities with their peers. Find grief support groups available, if needed.

Accept the child's open discussions about the deceased. Including talking or joining with them, magical thinking (did they cause the death), and concerns about their parent or caregiver's health or financial problems.

Understand the child can simultaneously hold seemingly contradictory emotions such as feeling sad about the death yet happy to see family at the memorial service.

Address how the death has and will affect their lives . . . "who will help me with my homework?" Children need the reassurance of continuity in their world.

Help them address separation anxiety by fully preparing them for any future anticipated separations.

Establish ongoing family routines, including positive times you spend together as a family.

Include and allow the child to be as involved as they want to be. Ask the child how they want to participate: pick out flowers, help a sibling, walk the dog, create a photo collage, draw a picture to be placed in the casket, etc.



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Teens (13 years old to adulthood)

Understanding and Response to Death

- The teen's awareness and understanding of death are similar to adults. They can incorporate multiple causes and consequences of a death.
- Many complex emotions and grief can be explained and understood.
- Support them in understanding grief is a combination of reactions one can have after someone has died such as thoughts about the person, feelings like sadness or anger, and physical reactions such as tiredness or an upset stomach. They can also experience more subtle emotions or regret, ambivalence, or relief. These reactions can come or go.
- Anger can be attributed to a number of causes. It may not be anger the teen feels because an important person has died but the anger they feel when no one listens or talks to them or has excluded them from activities. Do not assume what prompts feelings, ask.
- Teens do not inherently see themselves as responsible for a death but are apt to analyze information to determine who or what is responsible.

Sources of Support

Although peers and other adults become increasingly important, caregivers remain critical sources of information and support.

What They May Need from Caregiver(s)

Be available to listen and talk. Caregivers can engage in detailed narratives of the death and related events.

Encourage involvement in family activities. Although they are increasingly involved with peers and outside activities, your family's continuity as a safe place where people care about each other is very important to them.

Be aware of the intensity of a teen's grief experience. They may express mood swings. Expect and accept mood swings. Allow hidden feelings unless there is a risk of harm.

Offer specific opportunities for expressing feelings and remembrance through writing, art, music, sports, etc.

Encourage their participation in peer support groups, if desired.

Support their unique identity development and independence. Acknowledging their preference of spending more time with friends balanced with continued involvement in family activities and family bereavement remembrances. Avoid escalation of conflict as they express their independent identity.

Consistently set appropriate limits. Adolescents need these limits, although they may protest them.

Avoid having them take on too much family responsibility if it is at the expense of their independent development.

Encourage stress reduction. Avoid getting them involved in solving stressful situations beyond their ability to control, such as conflicts between adult family members.

Include and allow the teen to be as involved as they want to be. Ask the teen how they want to participate: pick out flowers, help a sibling, read a poem, create a photo collage, write a letter to be placed in the casket, etc.



For additional resources, visit www.childrengrieve.org



Inclusive Gender Statement: In the context of this document, the use of the term “child” encompasses both boys and girls, as well as any other gender identity or gender expression that falls within the spectrum of childhood. This language choice is intended to promote inclusion and respect for the diversity of gender identities and non-binary genders.



The NACG has a range of free resources available on our website to support professionals and caregivers. You can access them at www.nacg.org/resources.

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