

How Children Grieve

Introduction

It is believed that infants grieve. If there are people who have been consistently present in a baby's life, the child will have a sense of something missing. A young child often does not initially respond to hearing that someone has died. Many parents are concerned that their child has no initial reaction or visible grief. It is important to remember that a young child's perception is oriented in the five basic senses. It is concrete, short-range and based on what is felt in the moment. A young child does not comprehend the concept of death. A person is gone; then a person is there. When a person is gone and then still gone and then still gone, a child may grieve at each moment when he or she feels the person's gone-ness. A child may not grieve at all for these leavings until the accumulative affect of gone-ness inspires a longing or aching protest within the child.

The child will miss the specific elements of the person: sound of voice, expression, smell, and activities experienced together. A child's missing of the person who has died will not necessarily be as a result of hearing that that person is dead. Very young children may grieve a specific person. The primary care giver is most missed by young children: smell, voice, rhythm, etc. Young children also mourn the loss of secondary people in their lives such as other family members and persons with whom the child spends large amounts of time.

Children Are Concrete in Their Thinking

In order to lessen confusion, use the words death and dying. Describe death concretely. Answer their questions simply and honestly, not using euphemisms such as passed on, went to sleep, etc. You don't have to add a large number of details. Children will ask if they want to know more. You can see if they are listening because they want to or for your benefit (agitated, fidgety, little or no eye contact).

Children Generalize from Specific to General

If someone died in a hospital, children think that hospitals are for dying. If someone died in their sleep, children are afraid to go to sleep. If one person died they may think, "someone (or everyone) else will die" or "I will die." They will learn to accommodate new truths on their own if they are allowed to express themselves and try things out (such as going to sleep and waking up alive).

Children Are Repetitive in Their Grief

Children may ask questions repetitively. The answers often do not resolve their searching. The searching itself is part of their grief work. Their questions are indicative of their feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Listen and support their searching. Answer repetitively. You may have to tell the story over and over and over again.

Children Are Physical in Their Grief

The older children are, the more capable they are of expressing themselves in words. Younger children simply are their feelings. What they do with their bodies speaks their feelings.

Grief is a physical experience for all ages, and most especially for younger children. Movement and active play yield communication. Watch their bodies and understand their play as their language of grief. Reflect their play verbally and physically as a way of supporting their communication. Thus, they will feel that they are being heard, and they may feel like continuing to communicate in this way with you. Example: "You are bouncing, bouncing, bouncing on those pillows; your face is red, and you are yelling loudly."

Abstract Thinking

As children become older, they begin to grasp the concept of death. Their "death data bank" grows. They will begin to understand that the person will never come back because he or she is "dead," and death begins to take on meaning.