

Abstract thinking develops more in-depth with the onset of adolescence. Sometimes a death will lead adolescents into philosophic pondering, sometimes appearing like depression, as they investigate the meaning of the event that has occurred. Questions might arise, such as: What is life? What is death? Who am I?

Children Grieve Cyclically

Their grief work goes in cycles throughout their childhood and life. Each time they reach a new developmental level they reintegrate the important events of their lives, using their newly acquired processes and skills.

Example: A one-year old upon losing her mother will become absorbed in the death again when her language skills develop and, as she is able to use words for the expression of her feelings. She may re-experience the grief again as an adolescent, using her newly acquired cognitive skills of abstract thinking.

Children Need Choices

Death is a disruption in children's lives that is quite frightening. Their lives will probably seem un-dependable, unstable, confusing and out of control. These topsy-turvy feelings can be smoothed if children have some say in what they do or don't do to memorialize the person who died and to express their feelings about the death.

- Whenever possible, children should be offered choices about going to the hospital, viewing the body, attending the funeral, etc.
- Children often appreciate being offered pictures and possessions of the deceased person as a way of supporting their grieving process. Allow them to have clothing of the person, to play with the toys or objects and to have pictures. Let them choose what they want and what to do with them.
- The grieving child may assume qualities of the dead person as a way of keeping a sense of that person alive. Mannerisms and symptoms of the deceased person may appear.

Children Grieve as Part of a Family

When a family member dies, it will affect the way the family functions as a whole. All the relationships within the family may shift, adjusting to this change in the family structure. Children may mourn the person who died and the environment in the family that existed before the death. Children may grieve the changed behavior of family and friends.

It is helpful if each family member is encouraged to grieve in his/her own way, with support for individual differences. Family members are given permission to see each other's mourning, if possible. It's important not to shield children from emotions. Offering them the option to be alone or with others will facilitate their feeling of being included and give them permission to be with their feelings as well.

A Child's Feelings

Children's feelings are their allies. Feelings help children to pay attention to their loss. Through this attention comes their own understanding about the death they are grieving. A young child does not understand the abstract concept of death. But a child does have feelings that most often are expressed through behavior (e.g. play, acting out) or questions that show a search for meaning.

Fear

The most basic feeling of loss for a child is that of fear, fear and uncertainty about: What happened? Who will die next? How will we live without the dead person? Will my parents ever recover from their grief? Will my other parent die? How often does death occur? Who will take care of me? Where will I go if I die? Why did it happen to me? And, most especially, will I die?

Children of all ages must go through their fearful feelings until they come to their own understanding. This may be strenuous on both parents and children (e.g. nightmares, physical symptoms). If children receive sufficient attention and nurturing during this fearful time, they will recover a sense of the basic dependability of life. Listen to a child's fears and validate them as difficult feelings to feel. Fear can appear differently in different children.

Some children act younger or regress. They want the reassurance, the care and attention that they received when they were younger. Some children become over-achievers in an attempt to contradict