

A Child's View of Grief

A Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Counselors

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Introduction

When someone loved dies, children grieve. The most important factor in how children react to the death is the response of the adults in their lives. Caring adults—whether they are parents, relatives, or friends—can help children during this tragic time. Handled with warmth and understanding, a child's early experiences with death can be opportunities to learn about life and living as well as death and dying.

For parents and other adult caregivers, the first step in learning how to help children deal with death is to become educated about grief. Well-intentioned adults sometimes pass on their own anxieties and fears to the children they are trying to help. Studies show that children often suffer more from the loss of parental support during this time than from the death itself.

Children in our society are referred to as the "forgotten mourners." Children grieve, but all too often they don't get the opportunity to express their feelings openly. This is a situation concerned adults must address. The challenge is to learn how to establish "helping-healing" relationships with children whose lives have been touched by the death of someone loved. When caring adults meet this challenge, children are capable of reconciling grief in healthy ways.

How a Grieving Child Feels

When someone loved dies, children express themselves in a variety of ways. Caring adults need to be aware of these forms of expression and recognize them as natural ways children work through their grief. Twelve dimensions of grief commonly experienced by grieving children are listed below. This list is not all-inclusive nor mutually exclusive. These grief responses occur in no specific order of progression. Each child's responses are uniquely different.

Dimensions of Childhood Grief

Apparent lack of feelings

Acting-out behavior

Physiological changes

Fear

Regressive behavior

Guilt and self-blame

"Big-Man" or "Big-Woman" syndrome

Relief

Disorganization and panic

Loss and loneliness

Explosive emotions

Reconciliation

Apparent lack of feelings

Children often respond to the death of someone loved with emotional shock and an apparent lack of feelings. They can be playing in the yard only hours or even minutes after learning of the death. Rather than being inappropriate, this behavior is a protective mechanism and nature's way of caring for children. It allows them to detach themselves from the pain in the only way they can.

Adults are often confused by this apparent indifference. However, they should recognize it as a child's way of naturally pushing away, at least temporarily, the knowledge that a loved one has died. Adults at this time must be supportive and accept this behavior as a necessary step toward healing.

Adults can provide opportunities for children to mourn in healthy ways, but should never force them to feel something before they are ready for the pain that precedes healing. Just as an adult puts a Band-Aid on a child's physical wound, adults must respect a child's need to temporarily cover up emotional wounds.

Regressive behavior

Under the normal stress of grief, children often return to a sense of protection and security they experienced at earlier times in their lives. This need is manifested in different ways: