

YOU AND YOUR GRIEVING YOUNG CHILD

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The death of a significant person can be devastating for children and adults. But what children think and know about death, and how they react, can vary with their age. To understand how children are doing, it is important to look at their behavior, feelings, thoughts, and physical reactions. In general, in the first months and year after a death the following is common.

Infants and toddlers before age 3

- Cry
- Cling
- Regress
- Have problems with eating or sleeping
- Have repetitive talk or play
- React to someone missing but don't understand the finality
- React to changes in their environment – who is there, and when things are done

Pre-schoolers and young children 3-5 years old

- Cry
- Fight, are irritable
- Have separation fears
- Regress
- Have problems with eating or sleeping
- May have interest in details of death
- Associate death with punishment
- Are concrete and literal in their thinking

We consider it important for children to engage in different grief-related tasks.

- Accept the reality and permanence of death
- Experience and cope with difficult emotional reactions
- Adjust to changes in their lives and changes in their identity that result from the death
- Develop new relationships or deepen existing ones
- Maintain a continuing, healthy attachment to the deceased person through remembrance activities
- Find some meaning in the death and learn about life or oneself
- Continue through the normal developmental stages

Growing up requires lots of energy and work and young children are usually eager to continue learning and experiencing new things. As the years go by, a young child develops many new memories that do not involve the person who died. Therefore, it can feel like even more of a mismatch between what a child and adult are experiencing.

Keep in mind:

- Children have their own personality, style, and course of development. Just as children walk and talk at different ages, there is no one correct time or way to respond.
- Children are ever changing and growing. As they get older and develop physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally their thoughts and questions will change as well.
- Because the cause of death was traumatic, the child may also show signs of worry, avoidance, sensitivity to certain reminders

Suggestions for parents and caregivers

- Be honest and accurate when talking to children
- Use age appropriate language
- Use books
- Take your cues from the child
- Model good coping
- Set limits
- Expect repeated questions
- Help the child create memories of the person
- Support the child developing new relationships
- Mention the person who has died in casual conversation
- Prepare the child for questions
- Expect difficult times and plan ahead

Remember: The better parents and caregivers are doing the better children will do