



### How to Parent in this Difficult Time

- Remember that it is O.K. for your children to hear and see you express your feelings.
- Remember that children learn how to comfort by being comforted and by having the opportunity to comfort others.
- Set limits on behavior even if you know your child is acting out of his/her grief (e.g., "I know you are angry, but you may not hit your sister. You may stomp your foot.").
- Keep daily routines as normal as possible. Structure and consistency are comforts to children.
- Be clear with children under 10 about what it means to be dead (e.g., You don't feel cold or hot, you don't eat, you don't go to the bathroom.).
- Remember that children grieve in different ways than adults. They grieve for brief periods of time and then they return to those things that interest them as children, for example riding bikes, playing ball, reading or playing dolls.
- Avoid describing death in ways such as taking a trip or being needed by God. Such phrases can cause a child to fear travel or God. Children are concrete thinkers and need concrete words and phrases to describe death.
- Know that adolescents want to be as much like their peers as possible. Death sets them apart, therefore they may be reluctant to discuss feelings. Continue to talk about your feelings, and assure them you are available for them when they do want to talk.
- Remember that your children will experience pain at the loss of a loved one. You cannot shelter them from this wound.

### Common Behaviors of Grieving Children

#### Denial

- I can't believe mommy died.
- My daddy didn't really die. He just went on a long trip. He'll be back.

#### Panic

- Mommy, are you going to die, too?
- Who will take care of me?
- What is going to happen to me?

#### Anger

- How could daddy die and leave me all alone?
- Why couldn't the doctors and nurses save him?
- Why would God let my friend die?

#### Guilt

- If only I hadn't yelled at her, then she'd still be alive.
- I shouldn't have said I hated her.
- It's my fault.
- I've been bad lately.

#### Regression

##### Bodily Distress and Anxiety

- I can't sleep.
- I'm not hungry. My stomach hurts.
- I feel sick like Johnny did when he was dying.

##### Clinging or Replacement

- Please don't leave me. I don't want you to go to work.
- Grandpa, do you love me as much as you do Dad.

##### Preoccupation with the Deceased

- I remember how we used to...
- Daddy would have done it this way.
- This was always Mommy's favorite food.

#### Hyperactivity

##### Shortened Attention Span

- I just can't seem to concentrate on my schoolwork anymore.
- It's as if he's off in his own world.

#### Withdrawal

##### Assumption of Mannerisms of the Deceased

- I can fix things just like my dad.
- I'm in charge now.

#### Idealization of the Deceased

- My grandpa was the best in the whole world.
- Nobody could do that better than my mom.
- My brother was good at everything he did.

## A Child's Understanding About Death

A child's ability to understand the concept of death and what it means to him/her varies with the child's age. Adults need to be aware of the understanding level of the child and adjust any explanation to that level. The most important thing to remember is to be as accurate, honest, and open as possible. Do not give elaborate explanations. Giving a child more than he/she can understand only confuses that child. Encourage questions and assure him/her that any emotions being felt are the same feelings as those other children in similar situations have felt.

The following list can serve as a loose guide to a child's developmental stages, reactions to death, and possible acting out behaviors:

### Under two years of age:

- Can sense that something is different, that there is a change in the emotional atmosphere
- Does not understand yet what death is
- Probably won't remember the person who died
- Needs a lot of nonverbal communication (i.e., hugs, rocking, continued routine)
- Acting out behaviors: fussiness, clinginess to adults, regression

### Three to five years of age:

- Sees death as temporary, believes that the person will return or can be visited
- Has difficulty handling concepts such as heaven, the soul or spirit
- Feels sadness, but often for only a short time and often escapes into play, giving adults the impression the child isn't really grieving
- Substitutes attachment to another person in exchange for attachment to person who died
- May not remember the person who died
- Needs a daily routine, structure, affection and reassurance
- Acting out behaviors include: regression, nightmares, aggression, non-compliance

### Five to ten years of age:

- Begins to understand that death is final and permanent
- Begins to have a fear of death and of others dying
- May feel guilt (magical thinking) and blame self for the death
- Has difficulty putting problems and feelings into words
- Often asks concrete and specific questions about the death, the body, etc.
- Identifies strongly with the deceased
- Acting behaviors include: compulsive care giving, aggression, possessiveness, regression, headaches, stomach aches, phobias

### Ten to eighteen years of age:

- Recognizes that death is inevitable and irreversible
- May worry or think about own death
- Often tries not to think or talk about the recent death
- Hides feelings sometimes out of embarrassment or concern for other grieving family members or fear of "looking different" from peers
- Sometimes questions religious beliefs
- Often angry at the deceased, or, if an accident or murder, at other people involved in the death
- Fears future
- Acting behaviors include: aggression, possessiveness, headaches, stomach aches, phobias, increased sexual activity, increased drug use, increased risk taking, defiance, suicidal ideation

### Note

*Emotionally and cognitively, all of the above groups may exhibit irritability, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, apathy, depression, feelings of rejection, distractibility, short attention spans, and a decline in schoolwork or usual ability to attend to a task or play.*

## Children in Grief

The following article, "What Should They Know of Grief!," is by Jeanne M. Harper, a Thanatologist from Mariette, WI. In it, she offers us a general overview of how children conceptualize death. It is followed by additional material on how children experience death and grief.

### What Should They Know of Grief!

Children are forever asking questions about death — sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Yet grown-ups tend to believe that death is not a proper concern for them. In a study conducted in 1974, Robert Kastenbaum found that three-fourths of the respondents felt children seldom if ever thought of death, and are better off not thinking of death, and should be protected from death relevant situations. This vision of childhood as the "kingdom where nobody dies" seems to be an adult invention for adult purposes. If you simply listen to children engaged in spontaneous play and conversation you will hear explicit death-talk.

## **Infancy Through Early Childhood**

At this age, children lack conceptions of death. Certain experiences and behaviors, however, suggest a parallel to the state of non-being or death. “Peak-a-boo” and other disappearance-and- return games provide early clues as to how children begin to grasp what “all-gone” means. A young child, 18 months old, tries to place a dead bird back in the tree, or a leaf in the stem. Each such attempt gives a definite impression that the child is taking a small step or two toward conceptions of separation, finality, and death.

The child, from birth to three, can experience a tremendous sense of loss and grief—reaction to separation—but death as a concept does not enter the child’s thinking. These experiences are foundations for the conceptions of death seen later in the child.

## **From Three to Five Years Old**

Children at this age deny death as a normal and final process. Death is like sleep: you are dead, then you are alive again. Alternatively, it is like taking a journey; you are gone, then you come back again. Every day they may experience instances of what they consider “death,” such as when Daddy goes to work or Mother leaves for work or the store. Because of their limited frame of reference, questions like “Where did he go?” “When will he come back?” are quite difficult to answer. Because children do not understand death they may react with intense anger and experience severe rejection, especially when the death of a significant other occurs.

A workshop participant shared that when her husband (age 32) died, her four-year-old showed his anger with, “I wish you had died instead of Daddy.” This statement deeply distressed the mother because she did not realize that such displaced anger is common at that age. Her son was responding to his grief, not attacking her personally.

Young children have unlimited faith in their omnipotence, in their ability to make things happen—simply by wishing—and in their ability to undo things at will. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in 1973 found that children see death as reversible: “Temporary death wishing” is like a child stating he will make you dead because you said “no more cookies” and that makes him mad, so you are dead! Then an hour later the child brings the parent back to life when he needs something else or wants to be read to.

This belief in the reversibility of death serves as a comforting protection. Children begin to accept death as happening to other people but only when they are old...and they will never get old!

## **From Six to Nine Years Old**

Six-to-nine year olds see death as final, yet they still believe it won’t happen to them. They have a strong tendency to personify death, to

give it “person” qualities, to create a bogeyman. Inclined to be “wild” and boisterous, they are impressionable to the violence they see on television. Many children have an almost obsessive interest in death, and at times they sound morbid...just listen to their stories around midnight at camp or on sleep-overs. As they try to develop a perspective on what death is all about, it is very scary for them.

At this stage, children are also very interested in their own bodies and how they function biologically, and so their death-related questions may be “Will it hurt?” “How do you eat and sleep when you are dead?” “Will it hurt Grandma if I jump on her grave?”

Misinterpretation of facts or events can occur as they seek to isolate what causes death or what death means. For example, if Grandma died in the hospital, then being in the hospital equals death...so no way am I going to the hospital to have my tonsils out!

## **From Ten to Twelve Years Old**

Pre-adolescents view death not only as final, but also inevitable. Death will happen to them, too, no matter how fast they run or how cleverly they hide. By ten or twelve, children have become “social beings” so their questions relating to death are, “Who will take care of my friend now?” “Who will feed my pets?” “Who will help you?” They tend to feel responsible if someone very close to them dies, as if somehow they had something to do with the death. But, to protect themselves or hide their fear, they create stories or jokes about death.

## **Adolescents**

As the work of Piaget, Anthony, and others has suggested, children approach adolescence equipped with most of the intellectual tools necessary to understand both life and death in a logical manner. They have completed development of concepts of time, space, quantity, and causality which gives them a framework within which the idea of death can be placed: Death is one of many processes; it can be understood in relation to “natural law.”

To integrate the concept into their total view of life, however, they must face its personal implications. They fluctuate between “knowing” death is final and inevitable and believing that personal mortality is an unfounded rumor. Their defiance of death may explain some of their risk taking behavior—their games of Chicken and Russian Roulette, their reckless driving, drug use, and hitchhiking. Symbolically, they seem to be saying, “We have so much anxiety over death that we play with it.” Underneath it all they are seriously seeking the meaning of life. An attitude of defiance — “I dare it to happen to me” — replaces the joking of the preceding stage, as teenagers attempt to understand philosophically and psychologically both life and death.

## Adulthood

The person who stays alive psychologically continues to modify ideas about death through adulthood. As a young person starting a family, as a middle-aged citizen with many deep commitments and obligations, and as an elderly person moving toward exitus, yesterday's child encounters qualitatively different life situations. Certain basic concepts tend to remain firm — death is inevitable and final — but the full range of implications demands re-examination.

The stages through which an individual moves are at best approximations. While social, economic, and cultural variables play a part, age seems to be the most significant factor in developing a concept of death, as Jean Piaget contended. For the parent, teacher or counselor working with children/adolescents/adults who are grieving or groping toward an understanding of death, familiarity with the developmental sequences is important.

## How Then Do We Talk To Our Children About Death?

As adults, we often have trouble helping children handle their grief or talk about death. Sometimes the difficulty arises from our own unresolved feelings about death, sometimes because we are enmeshed in our own sorrow. Evading discussions with remarks that children are “too young” may bring a degree of false comfort to adults, but refusing to answer a child's questions or failing to deal with her feelings can cause unnecessary pain, if not emotional damage. Children must be allowed to talk openly and honestly about their feelings and be permitted to express emotions appropriate to grief or death. Otherwise, they may get the idea that “nice” girls and boys do not ask about such “bad” things, and their questions will remain unasked and therefore, unanswered. As adults we need to express that death is a natural part of living, a part of the life cycle; then children can begin to develop an intellectual understanding of the concept, along with the feeling that death is normal.

When we talk with children about death, we need to be honest and simple, for they have no greater need than truth and trust. If we tell them, “Your Mother has gone on a long journey,” they might interpret this to mean that she has abandoned them without a goodbye. They might then react with anger and resentment or they might think she will return someday or that she really didn't care for them in the first place. Likewise, if we say, “God wanted your Daddy with Him,” a child might wonder, “Don't Mommy and I need Daddy more than God?” and thus hold a resentment toward God. If a child believes God loves him, he might become upset with the thought: “God loves me too, maybe I'll be next.” If we say death is like sleeping, the analogy may trigger all kinds of dread at bedtime. Fear of going to sleep forever and never waking up may cause the child to resist bedtime and fight to remain awake.

To help children with questions about grief and death, we don't have to know all the answers. It is far healthier for a child to share a joint question for additional understanding than to have her immediate curiosity appeased by fantasy in the guise of fact.

Explaining death in a natural and loving manner is the best gift we can give a child. We can illustrate the sequences of life by pointing to nature: all living things have a time to grow, flourish, and die. Explanations presented without lurid, gruesome, or terrifying descriptions will help a child. We need to proceed slowly, simply, gradually, with patience and gentleness. Fears will be lessened when the discussion is initially focused not upon the morbidity of death but the beauty of life.

Just as we need not tell children everything about sex for them to go to a wedding or understand what marriage means, neither do we have to tell them everything about death for them to attend a funeral or come to some understanding about it. We do need to be sensitive to their questions, taking our cues from what they ask and their level of cognitive and emotional development.

We need to let children talk their feelings out — not talk them out of their feelings! Fear regarding death comes from either incomplete thinking or lack of knowledge. Our responsibility then lies in helping them complete their thinking. In the process of listening and responding, we can also learn. As Kastenbaum observed, “Children never live in a world apart from death. Rather, they are engaged in making a series of discoveries that adults might count themselves privileged to share.”

The following information, “Understanding Children’s Grief” by Izetta Smith, is reprinted from the Dougy Center Training Manual. The Dougy Center, in Portland, Oregon, provides support to children grieving a death.

## Understanding Children’s Grief

by Izetta Smith

### **A young child’s understanding of death:**

It is believed that infants grieve as well. If there are people who have been consistently present in a baby’s life, then the child will have a sense of something “missing.” It is believed that even as an infant is in utero, that s/he may become “used to” a person, and experience a loss if this person is no longer present in his/her life.

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, no visible grief. It is important to remember that a young child’s perception is oriented in their five basic senses. It is concrete, short range and based on what they feel in the moment. They do 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 they feel the person’s “goneness.” A child may not grieve at all for these leavings until the accumulative affect of “goneness” inspires a longing, an aching protest within the child. The child will miss the specific elements of the person: the sound of their voice, their expression, their smell, the activities they did together. A child’s missing of the person who has died will not necessarily be because of hearing that they are “dead.”

Very young children may grieve a specific person. The primary care giver is most missed by young children: his/her 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 their 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 if it’s for your benefit (they seem agitated, fidgety, and give you little or no eye contact).

### **Children generalize from the specific to the 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, “someone (or everyone) else will die,” or “I will die.”

They learn to accommodate new truths on their own if they are allowed to express themselves and try things out (i.e. 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 yields communication. Watch their bodies and understand their play as part of their language of grief.

Reflect their play verbally and physically, as a way of supporting their communication. Thus, they will feel 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, as their “death data bank” grows. They will begin to understand that the person will never come back because they are “dead,” and death begins to take on meaning.

Abstract thinking develops more in-depth with the onset of adolescence. Sometimes a death will lead an adolescent 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 their lives. Each time they reach a new developmental level, they reintegrate the important events of their lives, using their newly acquired processes and skills. (For 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 undependable, unstable, confusing, and out of control. These topsy-turvy feelings can be smoothed if the children have some say in what they do or don't do to memorialize the person who has died, and to express their feelings about the death.

- Whenever possible, children should be offered choices (going to the hospital, viewing the body, attending the funeral or not).
- 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 to do with them.
- The grieving child may assume qualities of the dead person as a way of keeping a sense of them alive. Mannerisms and symptoms of the deceased person may appear.

## **Children grieve as a 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 stay or leave will facilitate their feeling and give them permission to be with their feelings.

## **A child's feelings:**

A child's feelings are their allies. Feelings help the child to pay attention to their loss. Through this attention comes the child's own understanding about the death that he or she grieves.

A young child does not understand the meaning of concepts such as "marriage," "divorce," or "death." A child experiences their parents as their foundation, a form that exists for the sole purpose of caring and protecting them. When the death of a parent takes place, a child's entire world comes crashing down.

## **Fear:**

The most basic feeling of loss for a child is that of 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?

The younger children are, the less information they have gathered in the "death data bank," and the more they may be confused. False reassurance only delays the fear, it does not resolve it. Children of all ages must go through their fearful feelings until they come to their own understanding. This may be strenuous on both the parent and the children (i.e. nightmares, physical symptoms, regressions). If children receive sufficient attention and nurturing during this fearful time, they will recover a sense of the basic dependability of life with the additional understanding that some people die when they are young, but most people die when they are old.

When a child asks if you will die, answer "I do not want to die and it is unlikely" (if this is the truth), and tell them that you love them very much and want to be with them.

Be there for a child, listen to his/her 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 their own feelings of helplessness. They may do everything "right," even to the extent of parenting their parents.
- Some children exhibit exaggerated displays of power to counteract their fears, and this may take the form of super-hero manifestations, or may look like what we would characterize as "naughty behavior;" acting out, anger and/or belligerence.
- Some children may withdraw, become very quiet, frozen in fear.

## **Guilt:**

There are many kinds of guilt about death, including:

- Guilt from an intentional action that may have caused a death.
- Regret for actions (or lack of) that we did not do that might have prevented the death or pain thereof.
- An unrealistic sense of responsibility that “protects” us from the senselessness of the death. Sometimes unrealistic guilt can ease the fear that children may feel when someone dies. Taking unrealistic responsibility for a death gives children a false reassurance that they can prevent unwanted events if only they had tried harder.
- Over-protectiveness of children can also produce a child’s guilt. As a natural protection mechanism, parents want to protect their children from painful events. Because of this, they sometimes do not tell their children what is taking place. Children perceive the tension, sadness, and anger, and become frightened upon feeling that something horrible is taking place, but no one is talking to them about it. All children attempt to make sense out of what is happening in their surroundings, and do so by filling in the gaps with their own imagined explanations, often with a sense of personal responsibility for what has taken place, feeling that they caused the events to occur in their lives. As they develop, they begin to comprehend that life’s events happen and that they are not solely responsible.

When a child feels unrealistic guilt for a death, remind him/her of the facts of the situation. “It’s not your fault. You are a child and could not have taken over the driving of the car to save daddy. Daddy was an adult, a good driver, and he couldn’t do it.” “The other car was coming towards us too fast and that is why it hit us and killed daddy.”

When a child continues to feel unrealistic guilt, then listen to the child’s feeling of guilt and acknowledge it as a difficult feeling to have. The child may need to continue to feel the guilt until the child is ready to feel the more difficult feelings of vulnerability that the death has brought up in his/her life.

## **Anger:**

There are different kinds of anger expressed in grieving. There may be unresolved issues between a child and the one who died, which can result in anger in the child.

There maybe anger in a child as protest against the fact of the death and the lack of dependability of life. Anger can also be an antidote to the fear, an outward display of personal power. Through a child’s anger, s/he may be communicating “I am strong enough to control life with my force.” A child may become rebellious and angry to counteract the vulnerability of feeling their sorrow.

## **Sorrow:**

When a child feels sorrow, s/he may be ready to accept the truth of the loss without protest. Sorrow can be an expression of a child’s feeling of vulnerability as s/he continues to live without the person who died. There may be a loss of security that the child grieves.

## **Acceptance:**

It is our experience that we do not “get over” an important death in our lives, we learn to live with it, accept it, and go on with our lives to create joy in living. Gentle acknowledgment throughout our lives of the ones who have died gives depth to the picture of our experience of life, and death.

# Parenting in Difficult Times

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## Recommended Reading

The following is a list of books that can help children during grief. These and many more books are available at libraries, bookstores, Amazon.com, or BarnesandNoble.com.

### For Children Ages 3 to 9

*Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*  
by Mellonic & Ingpen

*The Rag Coat* by Lauren Mills

*When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie & Marc Brown

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf (A Story of Life for All Ages)*  
by Leo Buscaglia

*The Dead Bird*  
by Margaret Wise Brown (good for a very young child)

*Badger's Parting Gifts*  
by Susan Varley

*After the Funeral* by Jane Winsch

*Saying Goodbye to Daddy* by Judith Vigna

*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst

*The Empty Place* by Roberta Temes

*The Spirit of Tio Fernando* by Janice Levy

*Pablo Remembers* by George Ancona

*Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White

*Everybody Needs A Rock* by Byrd Baylor

*The Missing Piece Meets the Big O* by Shel Silverstein

*Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope* by Donna O'Toole

### For Children Ages 9 to 13

*Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson

*The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo

*The Lost Flower Children* by Janet Taylor Lisle

*Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt

*Annie and The Old One* by Miska Miles

*Souder* by W. H. Armstrong

*Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume

*Beat the Turtle Drum* by Constance Greene

*A Taste of Blackberries* by Doris Smith

*Robin On His Own* by J. M. Wilson

### For Teens

*Help for the Hard Times* by Earl Hipp

*Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers* by Earl Groilman

*Facing Change* by Donna O'Toole

*How It Feels When a Parent Dies* by Jill Kremrentz

*When a Parent Dies* by Fred Bratman

*When a Friend Dies* by Marilyn Gootman

*Teenagers Face to Face With Bereavement*  
by K. Gravelle & C. Haskins

### For Adults

*When the Bough Breaks (After the Death of a Child)*  
by Judith R. Bernstein, Ph.D.

*A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis

*How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*  
by Therese Rando

*Father Loss* by Neil Chethik

*Motherless Daughters* by Hope Edelman

*Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl