

Supporting Children Ages 3-6 Through Grief

How a Child This Age Understands Death

- Does not see death as permanent, but instead as reversible and temporary.
- May believe in magical thinking for example: their thoughts, actions, or feelings may have caused death, or that death is punishment for doing something bad.
- When explaining death, do not use words such as “sleep,” “went away,” or “passed away” this confuses children and may make them think person is coming back.
- The child may think he/she will catch the same thing and die as well.

Common Responses and Behaviors of Ages 3-6 After Hearing of the Death

- May act as if death never happened or seem unaffected by death.
- Regressive behaviors (i.e. bedwetting, thumb sucking).
- Increased anxiety (i.e. nightmares, and sleep disturbances).
- May need to talk about the death often. Address repetitive questions as he/she is understanding death and what it means.
- May express feelings or escape through play. Often, this involves acting out the death, or other traumatic events.
- May clown and “show off” to distract adults.

How to Help Your Child

- Be honest, use concrete terms to describe death such as ‘when people die, they no longer breathe or eat.’
- Maintain normal routines when possible.
- Provide opportunities to play, draw, and express feelings.
- Offer reassurance that nothing the child did, said, or thought caused the death to happen.
- Offer reassurances that family members will be OK.
- Continue to give lots of affection and support.
- Ask the child to participate in family rituals/saying good-bye if you feel this is appropriate.
 - It is alright to involve children in mourning rituals such as funerals or memorial services.
 - Be sure to explain what is involved in a ceremony including who will be there, where the body will be (i.e. casket), explain that many people may be crying or feeling sad.
- Use children’s books on death and loss to aid in understanding. Suggested books:
 - *A Terrible Thing Happened* by Margaret Holms
 - *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* by Laurie & Marc Brown
- Take care of yourself during this difficult time. You can help your child best when you are calm and rested.

Ways to Memorialize the Loss of a Loved One

- Encourage expression of feelings and create opportunities to share positive memories about the special person who has died.
- Ideas for creating memories: draw pictures, decorate picture frames, create collages with pictures and words about the special person, reading and telling stories about death of the loved one.
- Workbooks such as *How I Feel- A Coloring Book for Grieving Children* by Dr. Alan Wolfelt can help this age group be guided through and express their feelings through art.

Resources:

For Parents: These books may help you help your child

- Coloroso, B. (2000). *Parenting Through Crisis: Helping kids in times of loss, grief, and change*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Quill Publishers, Inc.
- Goldman, L. (2009). *Great Answers to Difficult Questions About Death: What children need to know*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Wolfelt, Alan. (2001). *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 practical ideas*. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press.

For Children: Please see separate “Recommended Resources” Handout to find age-appropriate resources for your child.

Helpful Websites:

- www.griefnet.org Has e-mail support groups for both adults and children
- www.hellogrief.org Has online support groups, articles and state-by-state resources on grief
- www.dougy.org Gives support to children, teens and young adults

It's important for parents to realize that children of all ages respond to death in a unique way. Children need comfort, support, and someone who will listen to their thoughts, and provide reassurance to ease their fears and concerns.

For any questions or assistance please contact:

- Colorado Springs Child Life Department at (719) 305-7003
- Bereavement & Palliative Care at (719) 305-1357



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