

# 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 she/he may be 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 response 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 the 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, and 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 as a result of hearing that they are "dead".

Very young children may grieve a specific person. The primary caregiver 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; without 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 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 will 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 to express 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 their language of grief.

Reflect their play verbally and physically, as a way of supporting their communication. Thus, they will feel that 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 (i.e., 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 had died, and to express their feelings about the death.

- Whenever possible children should be offered choices, (i.e. 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 and what 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 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 included, and give them permission to be with their feelings as well.

**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, 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:

1. Some children act younger - regress. They want the reassurance, the care, and attention that they received when they were younger.
2. 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 own parents.
3. 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.
4. Some children may withdraw, become very quiet, frozen in fear.

**Guilt:** There are many kinds of guilt about a death, including:

1. Guilt from intentional action that may have caused a death.
2. Regret for actions (or lack of) that we did not do that might have prevented the death or some pain thereof.
3. 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.

4. 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 tension, sadness, and anger, and become frightened upon feeling that something horrible is taking place, but no one is talking 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 may be anger in a child as protect 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 fear, she/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 fear and sorrow.

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

Loving arms around the child who cries with sorrow can offer the child safety and acceptance in a world that includes the dying of those we love.

**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 acknowledgement throughout our lives of the ones who have died gives depth to the picture of our experience of life, and death.