



formerly HospiceCare of Boulder & Broomfield Counties

COMMUNITYCARE

Hospice | Supportive Services

How to Explain Death to Infants and Toddlers

Children of all ages respond to death in unique ways. Children need comfort, support and someone who will provide reassurance to ease their fears and concerns.

How Infants and Toddlers Understand Death:

Infants have no real concept of death

Toddlers (up to age of three years)

- Death has very little meaning: Will not understand meaning of “alive” and “dead” or grasp the permanency of death “Mommy is not dead. She is just visiting grandma.”
- They sense emotions from caregivers who are sad, angry, anxious or frustrated

Common Responses & Behaviors after the Death of a Special Person:

- Increased crying, sucking, biting
- Infants cannot verbally communicate their needs: fear is often expressed by crying
- Reacts to separation and absences of primary caregiver, painful procedures, and any alteration in their routine. May ask repetitive questions
- Turns away when handled
- May have changes in sleeping, eating, and mood such as increased clinging, more irritable, eating issues, or temporary regression

How to Help Your Child:

- Give comfort. A loving, consistent adult will keep feeling of security intact
- Maintain consistent routines and keep change to a minimum
- Be patient and use simple comforting words, sounds or singing. “Grandma is not here and I miss her. Avoid using words other than died or dead. “Bye-bye, gone, or sleeping” are confusing,
- Allow the infant or toddler to be involved in family good-bye rituals
- Children should attend funerals or memorial services when appropriate but they should have a familiar adult with them. They grieve differently and may need time to play and be moving around. Extra attention explaining what is happening and giving physical touch like a hug can help.
- Model healthy coping behaviors by taking care of yourself to support your child

Ways Your Child Can Remember Your Special Person:

Encourage expression of feelings and create opportunities to share positive memories about the special person who has died. Ideas for creating memories:

- Read and tell stories about the loved one, draw pictures, share photographs
- Save a memento of the special person for when the child gets older. Let the child choose.

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