

Supporting Children Ages 3-6 Through Grief

Children respond to death in unique ways. Children need comfort and support. They need someone who will listen to their thoughts and provide reassurance to ease their fears and concerns.

How Your Child Understands Death:

- Does not see death as permanent but reversible and temporary
- May believe in magical thinking: 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 the person is coming back
- Child may think s/he will catch the same thing

Common Behaviors after Hearing the Death of a Special Person:

- May act as if death never happened or seem unaffected by death or may be clingy
- Regressive behaviors (i.e. bedwetting, thumb sucking, anxiety, nightmares and sleep disturbances)
- May need to talk about the death often. Address repetitive questions as he/she is processing death.
- May express feelings through play, expect emotions to surface during this time
- May “clown” and “show off” to distract adults

How to Help Your Child:

- Be honest and use concrete terms to describe death, “Grandma’s body stopped working.”
- Maintain daily routines when possible and continue to give lots of affection and support
- Provide opportunities to play, draw, express feelings, use books to help understanding death
- Offer reassurance that nothing the child, said, or thought caused the death to happen
- Offer reassurances that family members will be ok
- Involve children in funerals or memorial services. Be sure to explain what is involved in ceremony including who will be there, where the body will be (i.e. casket), explain that many people may be crying/feeling sad
- Model healthy coping behaviors by taking care of yourself to support your child

Ways Your Child Can Remember Your Special Person:

Encourage expressions 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 tell stories about death of loved one.