

Helping Teens Cope with Grief

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident or illness. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief.

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level and their capacity to understand the facts of the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. The range of reactions that children display in response to death may include:

- *Emotional shock*: This may appear as an apparent lack of feelings, which serves to help the child detach from the pain of the moment.
- *Regressive (immature) behaviors*: These behaviors include needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in a parent's bed, or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level.
- *Explosive emotions and acting-out behavior*: These may reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration, and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control.
- *Asking the same questions repeatedly*: This may be because the information is so hard to believe or accept and not that the child does not understand the facts. Repeated questions can help us determine if the child is responding to misinformation or to the real trauma of the event.

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones.

- ***Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences***: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- ***Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings***: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences.

- ***Grieving is a process, not an event:*** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume “normal” activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.
- ***Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:*** Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- ***Don’t assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:*** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one “correct” way for people to move through the grieving process.
- ***Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:*** Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- ***Keep in mind that grief work is hard:*** It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- ***Understand that grief work is complicated:*** Grieving may also be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the current situation. The sudden or violent nature of the death or the fact that some individuals may be considered missing rather than dead can further complicate the grieving process.
- ***Be aware of your own need to grieve:*** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

Tips for Children and Teens with Grieving Friends and Classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this “secondary” loss.

- Help children anticipate some changes in friends’ behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their “regular” friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.

Resources for Grieving and Traumatized Children

At times of severe stress both children and adults need extra support. Children who are physically and emotionally closest to this tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by these treacherous acts. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Taken and adapted from: *Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief* Tips for Teachers and Parents (2003) by the National Association of School Psychologists