Navigating Children's Grief:
How to Help Following a Death

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Possible Behaviors	How to Help
Birth–2 years	• No understanding of death • Child does not have words for feelings • Aware of the absence of loved one • Notices changes in routine • Notices changes in family emotions	• Longing • Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one • Fears of being abandoned • Anxiety	• Crying • Sickliness • Indigestion • Thrashing • Rocking • Throwing • Sucking, biting • Sleeplessness	• Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance • Maintain routines • Meet immediate physical needs • Include the child in the mourning process when possible • Be gentle & patient
3-5 years	• No understanding of permanence of death • To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip • May wonder what deceased is doing • Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible • May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies • Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities	• Fear • Sadness • Insecurity • Confusion • Anger • Irritable • Agitated • Worried • Guilty	• Regressive behaviors • Repetitive questions • Withdrawn • Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings • Interested in dead things • Acts as if death never happened • Intense dreams • Physical complaints • Crying • Fighting	• Allow the child to regress • Give physical contact • Encourage children to play & have fun • Allow safe ways to express feeling • Give simple & truthful answers to questions • Maintain structure and routines • Answer repetitive questions • Let the child cry • Talk (reflective listening) • Include child in family rituals & mourning
6-9 years	• Understands that death is final • Interested in the biology of death • Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay • His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death • Death is punishment • Forming spiritual concepts • Who will care for me if my caregiver dies • Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)	• Sad • Anger • Lonely • Withdrawn • Worried • Anxious • Irritable • Confusion • Guilty • Fear	• Regressive behaviors • Specific questioning – looking for details • Acts as if the death never happened • Hides feelings • Withdrawal • Nightmares / sleep disturbances • Concentration difficulties • Declining or greatly improved grades • Aggressive acting out • Protective of surviving loved ones	• Allow need to regress • Give physical contact • Have intentional times together • Answer questions truthfully • Watch for confusion • Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets • Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports • Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning • Find peer support for the child • Work with school to tailor workload

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Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Difficult Emotions	Behaviors	How to Help
9-12 years	• Understands the finality of death • Denial • His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death • Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) • High death awareness (death may happen again) • What if my caregiver dies? • Formulating spiritual concepts	• Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes • Shock • Sad • Anger • Confused • Lonely • Vulnerable • Fear • Worried • Guilty • Isolated • Abandoned • Anxious	• Regressive behavior & fluctuating moods • Hides feelings • Acts like death never happened • Aggressive acting out • Withdrawal • Nightmares & sleep disturbances • Concentration difficulties • Changes in grades • Talks about physical aspects of illness or death	• Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort • Expect & accept mood swings • Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. • Find peer support groups • Be available to listen and talk • Answer questions truthfully • Offer physical contact • Give choices about involvement in death & mourning
12 years and up (teenagers)	• Understands the finality & universality of death • Denial • His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death • Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) • High death awareness (death may happen again) • May sense own impending death • I need to be in control of feelings • If I show my feelings, I will be weak • Internal conflict about dependence & desiring independence • May utilize spiritual concepts to cope	• Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief • Shock • Sad • Anger • Confused • Lonely • Vulnerable • Fear • Worried • Guilty • Isolated • Abandoned • Anxious	• Occasional regressive behavior • Mood swings • Hides feelings • Acts like death never happened • Acts out role confusion • Aggressive acting out • Withdrawal • Nightmares & sleep disturbances • Concentration difficulties • Changes in grades • Impulsive & high risk behavior • Changes in peer groups • Fighting, screaming, arguing • Changes in eating patterns	• Allow regressive behavior & offer comfort • Expect & accept mood swings • Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm • Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc. • Support relationships with understanding adults • Be available to listen and talk • Answer questions truthfully • Share your grief • Watch for high risk behavior • Find peer support groups • Offer physical contact • Allow choices about involvement in death & mourning

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