

A Guide to Children's Grief

by Kenneth Doka

Though we try to protect children from death and loss, children experience a range of losses even in childhood. These losses can include separations and divorce, deaths of persons or pets or other losses such as relocation. As children experience these losses, they will grieve. This grief must be supported, not ignored. By supporting them, we help children not only adapt to the immediate loss, but also to learn adaptive skills that will help them face inevitable and subsequent losses. This brief guide hopes to offer information to help adults assist their children.

1. How do children understand death?

Death is a very difficult concept for young children to understand. They struggle with ideas like inevitability, universality, nonfunctionality, and irreversibility of death. They still may grapple with understanding what they believe happens after death. They are developing not only cognitively and spiritually, but also emotionally and socially. At young ages, children tend to view death through their own perspective. What does this death mean for me? Later they become more empathetic. Similarly, they are better able to understand and sustain feelings. Young children have a "short feeling span"; they can sustain strong feelings only for a short time.

2. How do children grieve?

Children grieve in ways similar to and different from adults. Like adults, children experience grief physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually and behaviorally. As with adults, they experience grief as a roller coaster. However, since they are still developing, they may revisit their grief as their understanding of death deepens. Since they have a shorter feeling span, their expressions of grief may be intense and episodic. Among the manifestations of grief may be regressive behaviors, acting out, sleep disturbances or changes in grades or attitudes.

3. How should I discuss death with a child?

First, always be honest and straightforward. The stories we weave to comfort children often confuse them. Let the child's questions guide the discussion. What do they want to know? What can they understand? What do they need to know? As always, death is best first discussed outside of a crisis. Structure opportunities from TV or stories to begin discussions about loss and lifecycles. Ask your librarian for resources appropriate to children at different ages. Some of these books or videos will help in educating a child about loss; others are helpful for a child experiencing grief.

4. Should a child visit someone in a hospital? Should they go to a funeral?

Children, as soon as they can sit through a visit, should have a choice. For that choice to be meaningful, children need information and options. Explain what they are likely to see. Give them choices. They can visit, call, or make a tape or card. They can go to the funeral visitation, service or cemetery. Make sure that there is someone around who can support the child. And provide opportunities later to discuss their experiences.

5. What does a grieving child need?

The child needs a great deal of support and understanding. When the loss is someone very close, like a parent or sibling, others in the family may be too involved in their own grief to support the child. Counseling, groups, grief camps, and simply solid support from friends and family may be helpful. A local hospice may be a good source of information about available recourses.

Kenneth J. Doka is a senior consultant for the Hospice Foundation of America and a professor of gerontology at The College of New Rochelle in New York. Professor Doka is the associate editor of *Omega* and the editor of "Children Mourning, Mourning Children" and "Living with Grief: Who We Are, How We Grieve."

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900 N Linder Meridian, ID 83642 Home Health (208) 888-7877 Hospice (208) 884-5051