

# Helping Children Understand Death and Grief

Talking to kids about death and dying requires sensitivity. But by addressing the concept with honesty, children will be better able to understand the changes the adults in their lives are experiencing.

Children often need to express their feelings after a loved one's death. Do your best to honor their grief and teach them ways to communicate their feelings.

## Processing grief by age

A child's understanding of forever, irreversibility, causality and transformation, and the ways they process grief can vary greatly by age.

### Birth – 2 years old

Though these children will not comprehend that someone has died, they will understand sadness and that their home's routine has changed. This may cause anxiety and eating, sleeping and toilet habits may change.

#### **Suggestions:**

- Normalize routines as much as possible
- Keep the child around familiar people
- Hug and cuddle the child for a sense of security

### 2-6 years old

These children often think death is reversible and may not recognize how it will affect them. These kids are "magical" thinkers; they may believe that they can bring back the person they've lost. Death may bring confusion and guilt for children of this age.

#### **Suggestions:**

- Monitor "magical" thinking and encourage open communication
- Comfort the child and allow expression of emotions

Continued on back.

## 6-9 years old

These children typically understand that death is final. Honest, direct, age-appropriate communication is important; kids of this age may respond well to books and stories that explain death and its finality.

### **Suggestions:**

- Validate the child's feelings and share your personal responses
- Help the child say goodbye in their own way—by writing a letter, drawing a picture, praying, etc.
- Consider allowing the child to participate in funeral planning, such as choosing flowers

## 9-12 years

Children in this age group have a sense of mortality and a strong sense of good and bad behavior. Some may see death as a punishment for bad behavior, and may show interest in biological factors of death, including rituals and burials.

### **Suggestions:**

- Provide open and honest communication; reassure the child that there will be someone to provide for and care for them
- Reassure kids that death is not caused by bad behavior or thoughts
- Allow the child an opportunity to share thoughts and remain an active listener
- Monitor regression to earlier stages of development

## Teenagers

Teenagers think more like adults and view death as inevitable and universal. Some may feel guilt, anger and/or responsibility for the death. They may feel invincible and partake in risky behavior or question the meaning of life if it ends in death.

### **Suggestions:**

- Listen when they talk and allow them to share their feelings freely
- Avoid redirecting, cutting them off, or trying to make them feel better
- Accept their need to sit quietly and cry
- Reassure them that whatever they are feeling is normal