

Understanding and Supporting Grieving Children at the Pre-School Stage (3 to 6 Years)

Regardless of age, anyone who has experienced a loss will mourn and grieve. If we can love, we can grieve. For children, grief is experienced differently according to their age; they tend to re-visit their grief with each developmental stage as they gain new levels of understanding of death and the impact of the loss on their own lives. While each child's reaction to death and loss is unique according to their personality and level of maturity, there are some common responses for pre-schoolers.



NORMAL DEVELOPMENT

Pre-school aged children tend to see and experience the world in a concrete or literal way. They think of the world as revolving around them, and they are entirely reliant on adults for their survival and well-being. Engaging in play is the primary way that young children work through problems and come to understand the world around them. They have fewer words and limited ability to express their thoughts through language, so feelings are often expressed through their behaviour. Young children are limited in their ability to understand the permanence of death.

COMMON REACTIONS TO DEATH AND LOSS

Often, a pre-school aged child will be able to say that the person has died yet think that the person will return. This can result in the child searching for the person who died. They will tend to talk a lot about the person and the death and may ask the same questions repeatedly. Talking about the death out loud helps a young child to process the information and come to understand that the person's death is real. Young children often feel abandoned by the person who died, as if the person chose to leave them. It is normal and natural for the child to regress for a period of time, such as a return to thumb-sucking, tantrums or toileting accidents. Young grieving children tend to display signs of separation anxiety, become clingy, and many will want to sleep with their primary guardian.

HOW A PARENT PRIMARY GUARDIAN CAN HELP THEIR YOUNG GRIEVING CHILD

In an effort to protect a young child from further pain, there is a natural tendency by the adults in their life to want to keep difficult information about the death from the child. Grieving parents/guardians may feel they should hide their own emotions so as to not upset the child. However, children need information in order to make sense of the death and to grieve.

When talking with a child about the death, it is helpful to let them know you are always willing to answer questions about the person, and how they died. When talking with the pre-school child it is best to provide truthful information using simple language. Avoid using abstract words which could mislead the child into thinking the person could return (ie. lost, passed away, gone to sleep).

Children's grief picture or story books are often very useful to help a young child understand death, and as a natural part of life. When the child is displaying an emotion, it can be helpful to say the feeling word they appear to be experiencing, to help the child connect with the words for their feelings. Young children have limited vocabulary. It is important to allow and encourage the child to explore and express their feelings of grief through play and art.



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Major life changes cause stress for everyone, including young children. To minimize the level of stress for young grieving children, it is helpful for the child to experience as few other changes as possible for awhile after the death. Though it is not always possible, remaining in the same family home and continuing with the same schedule and routine helps the child start to feel their life is stable and predictable. Children often take comfort in the belongings of the person who died, so it can be very helpful to delay sorting and disposing of the belongings. Allowing the child to keep an item of clothing or object

that helps them feel connected to the person who died can bring a lot of comfort. Parents/guardians of the child are often grieving themselves. Displaying grief emotions such as sadness and tears when talking about the person who died can be good modelling for a young child and gives them permission to express their feelings. However, it is important that parents/guardians also make sure the child knows that the parent is able to provide for the child. Young grieving children need added nurturing and reassurance that they will continue to be protected and cared for.

BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by M. Brown

Missing Mommy by R. Cobb

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss by M. Mundy

Where Are You? A Child's Book About Loss by L. Olivieri

I Miss You A First Look at Death by P. Thomas

What Does Dead Mean by C. Joy & J. Thomas

The Invisible String by P. Karst

