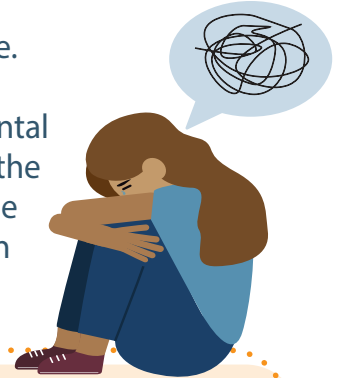


Understanding and Supporting Grieving Children at the School Aged Stage (6 to 11 Years)

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 school aged children.



NORMAL DEVELOPMENT

At this stage of life, children are still reliant on their parents/guardians for their survival, yet they are beginning to explore and understand the world beyond their immediate family, and they tend to want some independence in their decision-making. School-aged children begin to think and process information in a more logical way, no longer seeing the world as black and white (absolutes). They are also developing more abstract thinking (beyond what is seen). However, children at this age often have magical thinking, in which they believe that their thoughts and actions can directly affect other people's lives. School-aged children begin to develop a conscience, and sense of responsibility for their own actions.

COMMON REACTIONS TO DEATH AND LOSS

Unlike their peers, school-aged children who have experienced a death loss realize in a concrete way that everyone they know will eventually die. While children slowly develop an understanding of the permanence of death during this stage, some children continue to think of death as reversible. In keeping with developing a conscience and magical thinking, children in this age group often feel responsible in some way for causing the death of the person. They may even have feelings of guilt. Their understanding that the other important people in their life could also die often leads

school-aged children to experience heightened anxiety about their own safety and for the people in their family. This can result in bad dreams, not wanting to be away from home, a reluctance to go to school or other situations in which they are separated from their parent/guardian. At this stage children recognize that their death loss makes them different than their peers, often resulting in a sense of isolation.

HOW A PARENT PRIMARY GUARDIAN CAN HELP THEIR YOUNG GRIEVING CHILD

Just as each child in a family has their own personality and ways of expressing themselves in everyday life, this is also true when children are grieving. While one child may feel better by talking about the person who died, another child may find it easier to express through play, or art and drawing. Symbolic stories about life and death (ie. In nature) can be helpful to children at this age to sort through their grief thoughts and feelings. It is important to let the child know that you are always available and open to answer their questions and thoughts about the death and the person who died, but not to pressure the child to talk.



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Though the vocabulary of a school-aged child increases each year, their language is still limited, and they may struggle to put their grief thoughts and feelings into words which can lead to increased frustration and anger. When the adults in a grieving child's life share memories of the person who died on a casual daily basis, this can be helpful to give the child the message that it is okay to talk about and remember the person, and that the person won't be forgotten. Allowing the child to choose and keep some personal items of the person who died provides comfort and a continued connection to them.

Children in this age group often carry their grief stress and worries in their body. Opportunities for physical activity can be helpful to release the grief energy. Encouraging continued extra-curricular activities and playdates with friends help the child to have some sense of normalcy during loss and change, and provides some needed distraction from their grief. It is important to remind the child's school that they are grieving and ensure that the teacher understands what the child is going through (i.e. difficulty concentrating on school work). Teachers are often willing to put a plan into place to support the child when they need emotional breaks, or extra time for assignments, etc.

