Children and Grief  
(material adapted from the National Association of School Psychologists)

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- **Emotional shock** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- **Regressive (immature) behaviors**, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent’s bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child’s ability level;
- **Explosive emotions and acting out behavior** that reflect the child’s internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- **Asking the same questions over and over**, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

How Can Families Support Bereaved Children?

(An excerpt from the National Association of School Psychologists handout titled “Crisis: Helping Children Cope with Grief and Loss”)

How family members grieve following a death will influence how children grieve. When family members are able to talk about the loss, express their feelings, and provide support for children in the aftermath of a crisis, children are better able to develop healthy coping strategies. Family members are encouraged to:

- **Talk about the loss**. This gives children permission to talk about it, too.
- **Give children important facts** about the event at an appropriate developmental level. This may include helping children accurately understand what death is. For younger children, this explanation might include helping them to understand that the person’s body has stopped working and that it will never again work.
- **Ask questions** to find out about children’s understanding of the event.
- **Be prepared to discuss** the same details repeatedly with children. Children should be encouraged to talk about, play out, or even act out the traumatic event.
- **Help children understand the death** and prevent false reasoning about the cause of the event, ensuring that they do not blame themselves for the situation.
- **Create structure and routine for children** so they experience predictability and stability.
- **Acknowledge that it will take time to mourn** and that bereavement is a process that occurs over months and years. Be aware that normal grief reactions often last longer than 6 months, depending on the severity of the crisis and the meaning it has for children.
• *Take advantage of community resources*, such as counseling, especially if children do not seem to be developing strategies to cope with grief and loss.

**Helping Children Cope**

(material adapted from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition)

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones.

• **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences**: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.

• **Don’t assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings**: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)

• **Grieving is a process, not an event**: Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.

• **Don’t lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event**: Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.

• **Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death**: Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.

• **Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death**: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.

• **Don’t assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way**: We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.

• **Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need**: Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.

• **Children will need long-lasting support**: The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.

• **Keep in mind that grief work is hard**: It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.

• **Be aware of your own need to grieve**: Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

**Developmental Phases in Understanding Death**

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

• **Infants and Toddlers**: The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.
Preschoolers: Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death. For instance, as a result of the World Trade Center disaster, some children may imagine that going into tall buildings may cause someone’s death.

Early Elementary School: Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don’t fly, then people don’t die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one’s family.

Middle School: Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger and despair.

High School: Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness, or traumatic event. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.