

HELPING KIDS THROUGH GRIEF

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Although it is not uncommon for people of any age to be faced with the death of a loved one, kids cope with grief differently than adults and need help from parents and pediatricians to understand and come to terms with death and dying, according to a paper appearing in the February issue of the Journal of Pediatrics.

Unlike adults, for whom death of a loved one has an immediate impact, children typically have delayed reactions that may begin with shock or denial and evolve over weeks or months into sadness and anger. Like adults, the grief process should end with acceptance and return to normal activities, but for children it can be a long process.

Since parents often turn to their counselor or pediatricians for advice when a family member or other close loved one dies, these professionals should evaluate the child's responses and tailor the explanations about death and dying to concepts that are appropriate for the child's age. One has to be aware of the developmental level of the child. An explanation of death has to be geared to what their developmental level in terms of understanding is going to be.

For instance, very young children under age 2 may have little understanding of death and may perceive it as separation or abandonment. Children aged 2 to 6 are likely to think of death as temporary or reversible, often viewing it as a punishment and thinking they can wish the person back to life. Between ages 6 to 11, children gradually become aware of the finality of death but have difficulty understanding that everyone, including themselves, eventually dies. After age 11, most children have developed higher reasoning that helps them understand that death is irreversible, universal, and inevitable, and that all people, including themselves, must eventually die at some time, although they tend to view that time as far off in the future.

Parents also need to be reassured that anger and displays of emotion on the part of the child are normal and are part of the grieving process. They also should be encouraged to continue with family routines and discipline and to assure children that they did not cause the death, nor could they have prevented it. Parents should consult with their child's pediatrician or a mental health professional if grief is prolonged and may be referred for counseling if necessary. Signs of inappropriate grief include avoidance of feelings, repeated crying spells, suicidal ideation, social withdrawal, and decline in school performance.

Although the events surrounding the death of a loved one can be traumatic for people of any age, funeral or memorial services may help children understand the finality of death. However, most mental health professionals advise that if a child is going to attend or participate in such services, they should be prepared beforehand about what to expect. If it is clear that they may be upset by the experience, they should be given the option of not going.

The authors of this paper also recommend reading for the child and caregiver to aid in the grieving process. Recommendations include:

The Dead Bird, by Margaret Wise-Brown (for ages 3 to 5)

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (for ages 4 to 8)

The Magic Moth, by Virginia Lee (for ages 10 to 12)

Beat the Turtle Drum, by Constance C. Greene (for ages 10 to 14)