

When Children Grieve...



Siuslaw Valley Fire and Rescue and Western Lane Ambulance District staff would like to express our deepest sympathies for your loss. We have put together this booklet of information to help you walk through the difficult days ahead.

Feel free to contact a member of our Community Support Team if you have any further questions or needs.



When children suffer a loss, you will find that they grieve very differently than adults. In addition to individual differences in temperament and personality, there are distinct differences in how children grieve based on their age and developmental stage. This booklet was created to address some of these differences in children's grief: what behaviors to expect, how to best address those behaviors, and the reasons behind them.

Ages Two to Five

At this age, children don't fully understand that death is permanent. They don't realize it can't be reversed. And they don't yet know that it happens to everyone.

They will frequently ask the same questions over and over, such as "But when will she come home?". They may cry when first told of the death, then go play as if nothing has happened. Children at this age work through their emotions and confusion through play. Since they are limited in their ability to talk about their confusing and scary feelings, they will express it through their behavior.

You might see an increase in the following behaviors:

- ~Anxiety
- ~Crying
- ~Clinginess or need to be held
- ~Temper tantrums
- ~Repetitive questions about their loved one
- ~Irritability
- ~Regressive behavior such as bed wetting, fear of the dark, etc
- ~Sleep problems

Helpful ways to respond:

- ~Maintain a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability.
- ~Provide short, honest answers to their questions. Use the words "dead" and "died". Avoid sayings like "She passed away" or "She's sleeping now" because it further complicates a young child's understanding of death. Instead: "Grandpa died because his body stopped working".

- ~Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- ~Give simple choices whenever possible. “Do you want hot or cold cereal?”
- ~Provide plenty of opportunities for play. This is how children express their feelings at this age.
- ~Offer lots of physical and emotional comfort.

Ages Five to Eight

At this age, children oftentimes still see death as reversible. They are very concrete thinkers. They also have a tendency towards “magical thinking”, which means they may worry that their thoughts caused the person to die. It is important to relieve children of this erroneous and burdensome responsibility by repeatedly clarifying that it was not their fault.

You might see an increase in the following behaviors:

- ~Sleep disturbance and nightmares
- ~Change in appetite
- ~Concerns about their own safety/abandonment
- ~Short periods of strong emotions, then going to play as if nothing happened
- ~Regressive behaviors (fear of the dark, bed wetting, etc)
- ~Acting out behaviors, such as kicking, hitting or breaking things
- ~Physical complaints such as stomachaches, headaches or other complaints

Helpful ways to respond:

- ~Provide short, honest answers to their questions. Use the words “dead” and “died”. Avoid sayings like “She passed away” or “She’s sleeping now” because it further complicates a young child’s understanding of death. Instead: “Grandpa died because his body stopped working”.
- ~Be prepared to answer lots of repetitive questions.
- ~Provide plenty of opportunities for play.
- ~Allow children to talk about their loss and ask questions. Make time to listen to them.

- ~Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or in the morning?"
- ~Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- ~Offer lots of physical and emotional comfort.

Ages Eight to Twelve

At this age, children have a better understanding of abstract ideas like death and permanence. They are beginning to be able to understand how the death of their loved one will affect them long-term. Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions may have made the death happen. They may think things like: "It was my fault because I was mean to my brother."

You might see an increase in the following behaviors:

- ~Acting out behaviors (belligerence, refusal to follow the rules, bad attitude, etc).
- ~Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others. Worries that something bad will happen again.
- ~Difficulty concentrating and focusing (particularly with school work).
- ~Sleep disturbance and/or nightmares.
- ~Physical complaints such as headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- ~Detailed questions about death and dying. Children at this age may ask such questions as: "What happens to the body?" .
- ~Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry.
- ~Social withdrawal.

Helpful ways to respond:

- ~Answer questions clearly and accurately. Use the words "dead" and "died". Avoid sayings like "She passed away" or "She's gone".
- ~Provide a variety of activities for them to express their grief: talk, art, physical activity, play, writing.
- ~Maintain routines and limits, but be flexible whenever you can. This helps to re-establish safety and predictability in daily life.
- ~Give children choices whenever possible, such as: "Would you rather set the table or put the dishes away after we eat?"
- ~It is healthy for your children to see you expressing your own sad

emotions. This gives them “permission” to express theirs. Seeing adults express their emotions and taking care of themselves gives children a model for how to do this themselves.

~Be a good listener. Avoid giving advice unless they ask for it. Don’t try to “fix it” or “take away” their feelings. Just be supportive and listen.

~Talk with their teachers about what has happened, so they can be aware and provide extra support when needed.

~By all means, seek professional counseling for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Ages Twelve to Eighteen

Teenagers are able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death. They may wrestle with philosophical questions about the meaning of life, death, and traumatic events. Teens tend to see themselves as invincible at this age. Therefore death tends to hit teens especially hard because the death of a loved one, particularly if it is someone their age, shakes their belief in their own invincibility.

You might see an increase in the following behaviors:

~Withdrawal from family. At this age, children are more likely to seek support from their peers.

~Increased risk taking behaviors such as use of drugs or alcohol, reckless driving and other unsafe “risk taking” behaviors.

~ Difficulty concentrating, particularly at school.

~ Changes or disturbances in sleep and appetite.

~ Intense emotions such as anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety.

~Worry about safety of self and others. Fear of death or violence happening again.

~Teens may feel responsible for taking care of younger siblings (and sometimes other adults), especially when faced with the loss of a parent.

~May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm.

Helpful ways to respond:

~Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away. Answer questions honestly. Listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or placating. Have patience with your teen’s wide range of emotions, reactions and questions.

~Provide choices whenever possible. “I’d like to do something to honor your sister’s birthday, would you like to be part of that? What ideas do you have?”

~Encourage teens to connect with other support systems, including their friends and other adults (family friends, teachers, coaches). This may be uncomfortable for parents at a time when they want their child to turn to them for support. But teenagers need to be encouraged to seek support from others as well.

~Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself. Modeling these behaviors will give your teenager a “guide” for how to deal with grief in a healthy way.

~Reassure your teen that you will keep them safe, even if they don’t express these concerns to you.

~Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed. Adjust expectations whenever possible.

~By all means, seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

Should children attend the funeral?

This is a very common question! Some people don’t think so, but often that is because of their own discomfort with seeing children grieve. Your child’s grief is as significant as yours, and their bewilderment even greater. Children of all ages need to say their goodbyes and attending the funeral will help them with this. With younger children, explain what they can expect to see (adults will be sad and may be crying, their loved one may be in the front of the room and look like they are sleeping, people will be talking about all the nice things they remember about their loved one, etc). Ask your child if he/she would like to attend with you. Even young children are amazingly adept at knowing if they should go or not, and if given the choice, they will tell you.

Whether or not you allow your children to attend the funeral, it is always helpful to give them a concrete way to say goodbye. Suggest they draw a picture or write a letter or card to put in the casket with their loved one, that will remain with them forever. Children love this and it is a very healing experience for them.



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