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**Helping Children
Cope With Grief**

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Learning to accept death is a natural experience in life which must not be ignored. Talking about death to children is necessary. It is a vital part of every child's development.

Permitting the child to attend the funeral and discuss the death helps to relieve their fears and anxiety. It can also provide a mutual source of support.

Fear and mystery may be avoided by an honest explanation of death. Each time children inquire and are denied an honest response, they will use their imagination to create an answer. The longer such mysteries persist, the more difficult they are to correct.

How Should I Explain Death?

Honestly

- Give a brief explanation and answer their questions honestly.
- Don't use "*beautiful lies*" to shield children from death.
- Children do not need to know every detail. Give only the information asked for or required.

Simply

- Don't fear the words "*death*" and "*dead.*"
- Do not give more information than is required.
- Use language the child can understand.

Lovingly

- For children, closeness and involvement confirm their world is still safe and they will be cared for.
- Let children know that it is natural to feel sad. Don't hide your tears.
- Children need to know it is okay to cry.¹

What Can You Do?

Infants

- Keep to baby's schedule
- Keep baby at home with few visitors
- Talk to infant as you hold them

Toddlers to Five

- Be honest
- Answer questions
- Explain what death is
- Explain what feelings they may have
- Remind them they did not cause the death
- Involve them in the funeral
- Let them know they will be taken care of

Six to Nine

- Be honest
- Answer questions
- Explain feelings
- Talk about fears
- Involve the child in the funeral

Ten to Twelve

- Be honest
- Answer questions
- Explain feelings
- Provide a journal
- Offer love, understanding, and support
- Involve them in the funeral

Teens

- Talk openly about feelings
- Encourage teen to talk to teacher or school counsellor
- Encourage them to journal or draw
- Create rituals of memory
- Tell them what you need
- Let them tell you what they needⁱⁱⁱ

Age Appropriate Responses

Each child, like each adult, grieves differently and according to her own personality. However, children do have behavioural stages where some grief reactions may be common.

Infants

- More crying
- Thumb or finger sucking
- Senses anxiety, sorrow

1 Year – 2 Year

- May cling
- Doesn't want parent to leave
- May sleep more
- May wake frequently
- May be more "hyper"

3 Year – 5 Year

- Bedwetting is common
- Unable to verbalize feelings
- May ask questions
- Plays "death"
- Reverts to baby talk
- May want bottle and diapers

6 Year – 10 Year

- Plays "death" and "funeral"
- Shyness may increase
- Acting out may increase
- Grades may suffer
- School may become a safe haven

11 Year – Teens

- Anger is normal
- Feelings of "unfairness"
- Acting out occurs
- Philosophical talk with friends
- Search for spirituality
- Risky behavior is not uncommonⁱⁱ

Mention to your children's teachers or daycare staff that there have been changes in your family. It helps when your children are understood and supported by other adults. If there is a change in your children's behavior, others will then be better able to help them.^{iv}

Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. Your funeral director and your clergy person can be helpful. There are support groups and centres for grieving children and there are many resources. This is an important and valuable time for your family. Keep in mind you are the greatest resource in guiding your child through this grief.^v

ⁱ Ontario Funeral Service Association. (2004, December). Should Children Know About Death? (Seventh Edition). Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada.

ⁱⁱ Johnson, J. & Dr. Marvin (1998). Children Grieve, Too: Helping Children Cope with Grief. Omaha, NE, USA: Centering Corporation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, J. & Dr. Marvin (1998). Children Grieve, Too: Helping Children Cope with Grief. Omaha, NE, USA: Centering Corporation.

^{iv} Malchiodi, C. A. (2008). Creative Interventions with Traumatized Children. Developed by Family Counselling Centre Niagara. Guilford Publications.

^v Johnson, J. & Dr. Marvin (1998). Children Grieve, Too: Helping Children Cope with Grief. Omaha, NE, USA: Centering Corporation.