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Grief and Children

No. 8; Updated June 2018

When a family member dies, children react differently from adults. Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible, a belief reinforced by cartoon characters who die and come to life again. Children between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.

Adding to a child's shock and confusion at the death of a brother, sister, or parent is the unavailability of other family members, who may be so shaken by grief that they are not able to cope with the normal responsibility of childcare.

Parents should be aware of normal childhood responses to a death in the family, as well as signs when a child is having difficulty coping with grief. It is normal during the weeks following the death for some children to feel immediate grief or persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. However, long-term denial of the death or avoidance of grief can be emotionally unhealthy and can later lead to more severe problems.

A child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go, but a plan to honor or remember the person in some way, such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer, making a scrapbook, reviewing photographs, or telling a story, may be helpful to your child's grief process. Children should be allowed to express feelings about their loss and grief in their own way.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, especially around special times such as birthdays and holidays, but also at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

The person who has died was essential to the stability of the child's world, and anger is a natural reaction. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. Often the child will show anger towards the surviving family members.

After a parent dies, many children will act younger than they are. The child may temporarily become more infantile, need attention and cuddling, make unreasonable demands for food, talk baby talk, and even start wetting their beds at night. Younger children frequently believe they are the cause of what happens around them. A young child may believe a parent, grandparent, brother, or sister died because he or she had once wished the person dead when they were angry. The child feels guilty or blames him or herself because the wish came true.

Children who are having serious problems with grief and loss may show one or more of these signs:

- an extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events
- inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone
- acting much younger for an extended period
- excessively imitating the dead person
- believing they are talking to or seeing the deceased family member for an extended period of time
- repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
- withdrawal from friends
- sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school

If these signs persist, professional help may be needed. A child and adolescent psychiatrist or other qualified mental health professional can help the child accept the death and assist the others in helping the child through the mourning process.

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