

## 10 Basic Principles of Grieving for Children and Teens

*Children are concrete in their thinking*

*Children generalize from the specific to the general*

*Children are repetitive in their grief*

*Children are physical in their grief*

*Children grieve cyclically*

*Children need choices*

*Children grieve as part of a family*

*Children's feelings are their allies*

*Children's grief is intertwined with normal developmental tasks*

*There are Key Tasks of Mourning in Children and Teens*

### 1. **Children are concrete in their thinking:**

In order to lessen their confusion, use the words "death" and "dying." Describe death concretely. Answer their questions simply and honestly without using euphemisms such as "passed on," "went to sleep," etc. You don't have to add a large number of details. Children will ask if they want to know more. You can see if they are listening because they want to, or if it is for your benefit (they seem agitated, fidgety, and give you little or no eye contact).

### 2. **Children generalize from the specific to the general:**

If someone died in a hospital, children think that hospitals are for the dying. If someone died in their sleep, children are afraid to go to sleep. If one person died, "someone (or everyone) else will die," or "I will die." They will learn to accommodate new truths on their own if they are allowed to express themselves and try things out (e.g., going to sleep and waking up alive).

### 3. **Children are repetitive in their grief:**

Children may ask questions repetitively. The answers often do not resolve their searching. The searching itself is a part of their grief work. Their questions are indicative of their confusion and uncertainty. Listen and support their searching by answering repetitively and/or telling the story over and over again.

### 4. **Children are physical in their grief:**

The older children are, the more capable they are of expressing themselves in words. Younger children simply ARE their feelings. What they do with their bodies speaks their feelings. Grief is a physical experience for all ages, but most especially for younger children. Watch their bodies and understand their play as their language of grief. Reflect their play verbally and physically so that they will feel that they are "being heard." For example, "You are bouncing, bouncing, bouncing on those pillows. Your face is red and you are yelling loudly."

### 5. **Children grieve cyclically:**

Their grief work goes in cycles throughout their childhood and their lives. Each time they reach a new developmental level, they reintegrate the important events of their lives, using their newly acquired processes and skills. Example: a three year old, upon losing her mother, will become absorbed in the death again when her language skills develop and as she is able to use words for the expressions of her feelings. She may re-experience the grief again as an adolescent, using her newly acquired cognitive skills of abstract thinking.

### 6. **Children need choices:**

Death is a disruption in children's lives that is quite frightening. Their lives will probably seem undependable, unstable, confusing, and out of control. Helping them to have some say in what they do or don't do to memorialize and remember the person who has died, and to decide on ways to express their feelings about the death, can be reassuring and relieve some of the anxiety they may be feeling.

*Let  
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**7. Children grieve as part of a family:**

When a family member dies, it will affect the way the family functions as a whole. All the relationships within the family may shift, adjusting to this change in the family structure. Children will grieve for the person who died, as well as the environment in the family that existed before the death. Children may grieve over the changed behavior of family and friends. It is helpful if each family member is encouraged to grieve in his/her own way, with support for individual differences.

**8. Children's feelings are their allies:**

Feelings help children pay attention to their loss. Through this attention comes their own understanding about the death that they grieve. It is important not to shield children from their emotions and to let them know it's okay to show their feelings, and may actually help them feel better over time. Seeing adults express their feelings and model healthy ways of coping can have a major impact on children.

**9. Children's grief is intertwined with normal developmental tasks:**

It can be impossible to determine which behaviors are part of developmental phases and which are grief-related (e.g., "Is it adolescence or is it grief?"). However, experiencing a death does add complicating factors to the developmental process, and can be particularly challenging during adolescence. For adults who are helping grieving children and teens through particularly challenging periods of development and change, the best support is providing a steady, caring and attentive presence. Take your cues from your child and try to listen, validate, and accept where they are in their own grief.

**10. Key Tasks of Mourning in Children and Teens:**

- a. Understand the death and try to make sense of what happened.
- b. Express emotional and other strong responses to the loss.
- c. Commemorate the person who has died.
- d. Learn how to go on living and loving.

Let children and teens  
teach you about their grief.