

Understanding the Grieving Infant and Preschooler

Many adults underestimate the abilities of young children to realize something is wrong, and to understand what death is. As Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Ft. Collins, Colorado states, "Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve." A grieving infant may experience regressive behaviors including changes in sleeping and eating patterns, clinging, or irritability. Preschoolers often understand more than adults realize. Children are intuitive. They feel the trust in the atmosphere. They know something big has happened because the adults are acting different.

Adults often talk around young children, believing they can't understand what is being said, or that they're too young to "get it." A grandmother whose husband was dying talked with her 32-year-old son in the car as her 3-year-old grandchild sat in the back seat. They spelled some words so the child wouldn't "catch on." When they arrived to visit grandpa, the child ran into the house, jumped on grandpa's lap and said, "Grandpa - are you gonna be here for my birthday, or are you gonna be D- E- D?" Preschoolers have taught us they want and need to be told the truth, to be informed, and to have their questions answered truthfully.

It is important to understand that young children need to be included in the process when a family member is dying or has died. Attempting to "protect" them from this information will backfire in the long run, as they sense something is wrong yet no one will share with them what it is.

Children need clear, honest explanations about death.

Although young children do not usually understand the finality of death, they can learn, over time, what it means. A 3-year-old, hours after being told her father is dead, asks her mother, "Is Daddy going to be dead all day?" When told his mother has gone to heaven, a 4-year-old wonders aloud, "When will she be back?"

Explaining death to young children is most helpful when it's simple and concrete. Explaining the finality of death to young children may include the basic bodily functions: "when your mom is dead she can't eat, see, hear, sing, walk around, poop, laugh or cry. A dead person doesn't sleep, get hungry or cold or scared."

It may help if the child has a prior experience with death, like the death of a pet, or finding a dead bird on the lawn. Rather than hastily replacing the pet, or scooping up and tossing the bird, the parent can use these experiences as instructive and preparatory for children to understand death. Flushing a dead fish down the toilet may make a young child fear the "potty," or believe that's what happens to anyone who dies. Rushing out to replace a deceased dog may encourage the sense that the loved one can be easily replaced, and suggests that its uniqueness did not matter. Allowing a young child to experience the death of pets or other animals invites the curiosity of the child to be met with helpful explanations and information that can be applied when a more significant death occurs.

Young children may be repetitive in their questions.

It is common for little children to ask questions repetitively about the death. They learn about their world by having questions answered again and again. The same way that they learn $1 + 1 = 2$, they learn about death through asking and getting answers.

Young children learn by repetition and therefore need to ask the same questions over and over, or to hear the story of what happened again and again, much as they like to be read a familiar bedtime story. This can be difficult, if not exasperating, for the parent grieving the death of a spouse or child.

A young mother expressed concern about her 4-year-old's morning ritual of wanting to watch home videos of the older brother who died. She was concerned that this repetitive video watching would be harmful for her son. Also, it was difficult for her to see or hear the video each morning. Following the daily video watching, the boy would repeat the same questions, and after hearing the mother's answers he would go about his play like any normal 4-year-old. Months later the child gradually discontinued his morning video watching.

Young children don't necessarily have the tools to translate what they're feeling and thinking into language, although some are remarkably verbal and clear about what has happened.

After a death, a common fear of children is that others will die.

Because the death of someone close to a child upsets the sense of safety, security and control most children have, it is common for them to experience fear, insecurity and uncertainty.

Some children become very possessive of a surviving parent, afraid to let him or her out of sight, terrified that he or she too will die or disappear. Some take the opposite behavior, seeming to not care about the parent, withdrawing from relationships with adults or other children. They may be fearful that anyone they get close to will die.

Some children are eager to help the surviving parent find a replacement for the deceased parent. A 5-year-old standing in the grocery line with his mother remarked to the male clerk, "My dad died. Will you marry my mom?" Other children resent the time their surviving parent spends alone or without them; some children will do all they can to sabotage a potential relationship their parent might try to develop.

Most children are still dependent on others for their survival and basic needs. The loss of a parent or sibling is confusing and difficult. Many children in this age group do not have ways to verbalize their complex and confused feelings and thoughts, which often come out as anger, frustration and irritability. Some children are very verbal and open to talking about how they feel and what they think, while others barely mumble in response to a direct question.

Children tend to have magical thinking and often believe that they somehow caused the death. They frequently show signs of guilt because they assume that their behavior, thoughts or wishes contributed to the death.

Children want very much to be like their friends, and to fit in. They do not want to be different, yet when a parent or sibling dies, they are different. Often their friends, teachers, coaches and friends' parents don't know what to say or how to be around them.

Children respond well when they feel acceptance of their emotions and thoughts. Angry, frustrated children often do not know how to express those emotions except in behaviors that get them into trouble. It is helpful to assist them in finding ways to express this energy without hurting themselves or others. Anger can be expressed by kicking nerf balls, screaming into a pillow or throwing a stuffed animal.

Children are often tired and irritable because of sleeplessness, night terrors, or staying up late watching television in an attempt not to be alone in their own bedroom. Many children want to sleep with or, at least, close to the surviving parent. Some parents become concerned about fostering unhealthy dependencies. Some parents find having a child sleeping with them is too disruptive of their own sleep so they arrange a place next to their bed for the child if she or he needs to come in during the night. Some parents prefer to stay in the child's room until he or she falls asleep.

It is important to help the child feel safe in whatever way the child prefers. Their fears won't last forever, and providing safety and comfort for the child in the ways he or she needs is critical.

(From Helping Children Cope with Death, a booklet from The Dougy Center)