

Idaho Falls Pediatrics

Death: Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Loved One

When someone important to us dies, many things change in our lives. The same is true for children. To help children cope with a death, we must understand how they think about death and what has changed for them.

No two children respond exactly the same way to the death of a love one. Children are likely to respond to death differently and need different kinds of help, depending on their prior experience, their age, and what happens after the death.

Very Young Children

Children, ages 2 to 4, mainly miss the loved one who has died. They feel sad that they are not with the person anymore, but may think of death as a long vacation. Even with careful explanation, do not be surprised if your 3-year-old asks when the dead person will visit. This does not mean your child believes in ghosts, simply that he or she does not understand that death is really the end. Keep explaining in simple terms: "Remember Sara, Grandma died. That means that we won't see her again."

Be aware that your young child may repeat what you say but act like he does not understand what death means.

Young Children (ages 5 to 8)

- **Make sure your child doesn't feel at fault.**

Young children believe that their thoughts, feelings, and words have magical power. Everyone gets angry at times with people they love. When a loved one dies, a young child needs help to understand that angry feelings or hateful wishes do not cause people to die. Even older children and adults must be reminded of this from time-to-time.

- **Keep a normal routine for your child.**

Make sure your child feels secure, even after the death of a parent. The child's well being must come first. While it is important that your child is allowed to share in the family grief process, children cope best if returned to a normal routine as soon as possible. You may be concerned about how a death will affect your young child in the long run. A child who has a safe and stable routine and reliable people who care about him will not have long-term emotional problems related to the death.

- **Let your child grieve with adults, but not the same way as adults.**

Children should not be shielded from the sad feelings of grieving adults. However, your child may happily play and go about regular activities after the death of someone very important to her. Young children do not understand that death is final and should not be punished or scolded for not grieving like adults. Children express their feelings through play and should be encouraged to do so. Children who are grieving may act younger than they are in response to the death. They may engage in baby talk or be afraid of the dark. This phase typically passes in a short time.

You should not expect young children to comfort you in your grief. They may feel overburdened and scared. Your child needs to know that the adults will take care of him and at the same time, they will take care of themselves.

Your child will use you as a role model for how to grieve. If you do not talk about your grief or the person who died, your child will learn that these topics are not safe for discussion.

Adults need to grieve and that grieving can take away important energy from the needs of a child. If you have no energy to care for your child in your grief, ask for help. Family and friends can spend time with your child, take your child to normal activities, and attend to your child's needs. Unless you are seriously depressed, your child should not be sent away from you. There are many bereavement counselors and therapists who can help you cope with your grief and help you get your family back on track.

School-Age Children (ages 9 to 12)

After the death of a loved one or parent, your school-age child may be afraid that you will die too. Help her talk about her fears. Signs of such thoughts may include not wanting to leave you to go to school, headaches and stomachaches, or behavior problems. Ask children what they are feeling and thinking. Reassure them, in a realistic way, that there will always be someone to take care of them.

School-age children often worry about their own health. This is especially true after the death of a loved one to an illness or the death of another child. If your child says his head or stomach hurts, have your doctor check him. You may also want to contact a child psychologist, social worker, or hospice counselor experienced in working with grieving children. Sometimes a few sessions of play therapy can help children express their feelings and the physical pains go away.

Teens

Teenagers think much like adults do about death. They know death is the end and that the dead person will not come back. The death of a parent or other important person while the teenager still needs them can be devastating. At this age, religious beliefs can bring comfort. It is important to give your teenager a chance to talk about the death with adults who are also grieving.

Expect that your teen will have things to say that are difficult. Be open to the possibility that he or she is angry with you or with the person who died. Give your child plenty of chances to talk about all of her feelings and have them accepted.

Although your child may wish to be alone more than usual after the death, get help from a mental health professional if your child:

- withdraws for more than a week or two
- doesn't seem to care about school or other activities that were important to them
- has trouble sleeping, does not eat, or starts having behavior problems such as destroying things
- talks about suicide, such as saying, "I wish I were dead."

*NOTE: This information is provided as a public educational service. The information does not replace any of the instructions your physician gives you. If you have a medical emergency please call 911 or call the Hospital at (208) 529-6111. If you have questions about your child's care, please call Idaho Falls Pediatrics at (208) 522-4600.