### Navigating Children’s Grief: How to Help Following a Death

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Concepts and Beliefs</th>
<th>Difficult Emotions</th>
<th>Possible Behaviors</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| **Birth–2 years** | • No understanding of death  
• Child does not have words for feelings  
• Aware of the absence of loved one  
• Notices changes in routine  
• Notices changes in family emotions | • Longing  
• Misses contact, sounds, smell and sight of loved one  
• Fears of being abandoned  
• Anxiety | • Crying  
• Sickliness  
• Indigestion  
• Thrashing  
• Rocking  
• Throwing  
• Sucking, biting  
• Sleeplessness | • Physical contact, cuddling and reassurance  
• Maintain routines  
• Meet immediate physical needs  
• Include the child in the mourning process when possible  
• Be gentle & patient |
| **3-5 years** | • No understanding of permanence of death  
• To be dead is to be sleeping or on a trip  
• May wonder what deceased is doing  
• Can understand that biological processes have stopped, but sees this as temporary and reversible  
• May wonder what will happen if the other parent dies  
• Magical thinking and fantasies, often worse than realities | • Fear  
• Sadness  
• Insecurity  
• Confusion  
• Anger  
• Irritable  
• Agitated  
• Worried  
• Guilty | • Regressive behaviors  
• Repetitive questions  
• Withdrawn  
• Plays out scenes of death, change & feelings  
• Interested in dead things  
• Acts as if death never happened  
• Intense dreams  
• Physical complaints  
• Crying  
• Fighting | • Allow the child to regress  
• Give physical contact  
• Encourage children to play & have fun  
• Allow safe ways to express feeling  
• Give simple & truthful answers to questions  
• Maintain structure and routines  
• Answer repetitive questions  
• Let the child cry  
• Talk (reflective listening)  
• Include child in family rituals & mourning |
| **6-9 years** | • Understands that death is final  
• Interested in the biology of death  
• Death associated with bodily harm, mutilation & decay  
• His or her thoughts, actions or words caused the death  
• Death is punishment  
• Forming spiritual concepts  
• Who will care for me if my caregiver dies  
• Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.) | • Sad  
• Anger  
• Lonely  
• Withdrawn  
• Worried  
• Anxious  
• Irritable  
• Confusion  
• Guilty  
• Fear | • Regressive behaviors  
• Specific questioning – looking for details  
• Acts as if the death never happened  
• Hides feelings  
• Withdrawal  
• Nightmares / sleep disturbances  
• Concentration difficulties  
• Declining or greatly improved grades  
• Aggressive acting out  
• Protective of surviving loved ones | • Allow need to regress  
• Give physical contact  
• Have intentional times together  
• Answer questions truthfully  
• Watch for confusion  
• Allow expression of feelings through verbal & physical outlets  
• Encourage drawing, reading, playing, art, music, dance, acting, sports  
• Let child choose how to be involved in the death & mourning  
• Find peer support for the child  
• Work with school to tailor workload |
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9-12 years</td>
<td>• Understands the finality of death</td>
<td>• Emotional turmoil heightened by physical changes</td>
<td>• Regressive behavior &amp; fluctuating moods</td>
<td>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Denial</td>
<td>• Shock</td>
<td>• Hides feelings</td>
<td>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</td>
<td>• Sad</td>
<td>• Acts like death never happened</td>
<td>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased (graduation, marriage, etc.)</td>
<td>• Anger</td>
<td>• Aggressive acting out</td>
<td>• Find peer support groups</td>
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<td>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</td>
<td>• Confused</td>
<td>• Withdrawal</td>
<td>• Be available to listen and talk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What if my caregiver dies?</td>
<td>• Lonely</td>
<td>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbances</td>
<td>• Answer questions truthfully</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Formulating spiritual concepts</td>
<td>• Vulnerable</td>
<td>• Concentration difficulties</td>
<td>• Offer physical contact</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Fear</td>
<td>• Changes in grades</td>
<td>• Give choices about involvement in death &amp; mourning</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Worried</td>
<td>• Talks about physical aspects of illness or death</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Guilty</td>
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<td>• Isolated</td>
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<td>• Abandoned</td>
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<td>• Anxious</td>
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<td>12 years</td>
<td>• Understands the finality &amp; universality of death</td>
<td>• Highly self-conscious about being different due to</td>
<td>• Occasional regressive behavior</td>
<td>• Allow regressive behavior &amp; offer comfort</td>
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<tr>
<td>and up</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Denial</td>
<td>• Mood swings</td>
<td>• Expect &amp; accept mood swings</td>
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<tr>
<td>(teenagers)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• His/her words, thoughts or actions caused the death</td>
<td>• Hides feelings</td>
<td>• Allow hidden feelings unless there is risk of harm</td>
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<td>• Thinks about life’s milestones without the deceased</td>
<td>• Acts like death never happened</td>
<td>• Encourage expression of feelings through writing, art, music, sports, etc.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• (graduation, marriage, etc.)</td>
<td>• Acts out role confusion</td>
<td>• Support relationships with understanding adults</td>
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<td>• High death awareness (death may happen again)</td>
<td>• Aggressive acting out</td>
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<td>• May sense own impending death</td>
<td>• Withdrawal</td>
<td>• Answer questions truthfully</td>
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<td>• I need to be in control of feelings</td>
<td>• Nightmares &amp; sleep disturbances</td>
<td>• Share your grief</td>
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<td>• If I show my feelings, I will be weak</td>
<td>• Concentration difficulties</td>
<td>• Watch for high risk behavior</td>
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<td>• Internal conflict about dependence &amp; desiring</td>
<td>• Changes in grades</td>
<td>• Find peer support groups</td>
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<td>independence</td>
<td>• Impulsive &amp; high risk behavior</td>
<td>• Offer physical contact</td>
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<td>• May utilize spiritual concepts to cope</td>
<td>• Changes in peer groups</td>
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<td>• Fighting, screaming, arguing</td>
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<td>• Changes in eating patterns</td>
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