



GriefCare for Families
Module 5: Caregiving after a loss
Topic 1: Understanding grieving children

How children grieve

Grief is a child's response to loss and can look very different from adults. Children's experience with grief varies depending on their developmental stage. As children grow and develop, they experience changes in the way they think, feel and behave. These changes naturally influence the way children are in their relationships with friends, family, teachers; those in the world around them.

A child's perspective on the world is limited by their cognitive capacities. Their behavior is often driven by emotions which they can't control. For example, children experience emotions that can be sudden and intense but they are usually short lived. A child might be crying one minute, and outside playing 5 minutes later - their sadness seemingly forgotten. They understand the world differently. Children long for consistency and predictability. Bereavement changes the world around them. This is hard for everyone, but especially difficult for children. They lose interest in exploring the world and learning new things when their important relationships are threatened. They may lose their usual exuberance and interest in things.

Children understandably don't grieve in the same way as adults and the way they grieve varies based on their developmental stage. They vary in how they understand death. They use their imagination to forecast the future differently. The way they manage their emotions and control their behavior is different from adults. During childhood most people are still developing ways of remembering, thinking and managing their emotions and behavior. In addition, children are not fully able to take care of themselves. They are often concerned about this. Your wellbeing as a caregiver is a big concern for your children because they need you so much.

Children experience, express and control their emotions differently from adults. They can swing easily from good to bad moods and back again. Young children can cry at the seemingly slightest provocation and recover just as quickly. They can be afraid of the vacuum cleaner or your best friend. They can be angry and oppositional and even tell you they hate you and 5 minutes later want to cuddle.

Children's unpredictable emotionality can be disconcerting during bereavement, and it can occur in surprising ways. For example, your children may seem to be uncaring about the loss or they may suddenly become upset that the person is gone and become very emotional. Their emotions may be triggered by changes in routine, the absence of a family member's comforting presence or your own higher levels of emotionality or

changes in your behavior. These ways of reacting may seem selfish but they are very natural for a child.

Grieving children may become irritable or exhibit behaviors that seem more juvenile than their age. They may seem like they are losing ground in their development and acting like an infant or a younger child. It may seem like they regressed or moved backwards. It may be more accurate to understand their behavior if you consider it as a natural response for someone their age who has to deal with an unusually challenging event. Your job is to help them strengthen their capacity to meet this important challenge. Thinking about your children in this way makes it clear that a difficult loss gives your children an opportunity to grow and become stronger.

It's helpful for parents and caregivers to know what to expect during children's different stages of development. There are some general observations about children of different ages. We summarize them below. However, children, like adults, vary a great deal in the way they experience grief. The only way you can really understand your children is to listen to them. You may be feeling shaky and emotional yourself, but please keep the lines of communication open.

Infants and Toddlers

Infants form meaningful bonds with their mother while they are still in the womb and strong connections are forged with their primary caregiver beginning at birth. The relationship centers around co-regulation, physical and emotional comfort, and sensitive encouragement for developmentally appropriate skill building. Infants start responding to separation from caregivers at about 6-8 months. However, they do not understand loss until much later. Their reactions to a death are related to their sensitivity to the emotional state of the family. Infants are distressed by their own discomfort or by disruption of their environment.

Toddlers are also very good at sensing emotions in people around them, especially their caregivers. They may respond by becoming irritable or withdrawn, crying frequently, or become fussy with disrupted sleep. Their bodies may react to the loss with changes in eating or sleeping patterns. They may begin bed wetting, thumb sucking or other behaviors that the child seemed to have given up. You can think of your child as being under a great deal of stress. In a way they are a barometer of your family's grief.

One of the important consequences of irritability in a small child is the effect it has on a parent or caregiver. Most parents and caregivers react strongly to these changes in their children. If you are grieving yourself, the added burden of a fussy child can be very challenging. Try to be sure you have adequate support for yourself. Be sure you have as much help as possible in caring for small children in your home. Remember, your children benefit from seeing you reach out and ask for support. It's ok to need help.

Elementary School Children

Young children are naturally self-focused in their thinking. They haven't had much opportunity to learn about the world and their own experience is all they know. Children may think that something they did caused the death. In the first few years of elementary

school, children are sometimes able to understand that death is permanent but not always. They may still have the idea that death is reversible.

Young children often experience grief emotions in their body and those emotions often translate quickly into behavior. They may have trouble eating or sleeping and they may be aggressive or irritable. Children this age might also block out the reality and act like nothing has happened. They may alternate between this kind of behavior and feeling suddenly very distressed and confused.

Parents and caregivers can help their children by showing steadfast love and support. You can help by telling your children that even though their special person (or their sibling) has died, you are there for them. You can help by talking with them in ways that are direct and honest, using language they can understand. You can listen to their worries and help them name their feelings. You can do all of this more effectively if you understand and accept your own grief.

Middle School Children

Older children might understand that death is not reversible. They may be angry or frightened by this. Sometimes children of this age withdraw, becoming sad and lonely. They may still think that the death is their fault. Children this age may have a lot of questions about the death and may ask for a lot of details.

Peers and the social environment are important to children this age. They don't want to act or feel different from others. They don't want to stand out or be different and may feel ashamed because of their loss. They may worry about whether they are responding to the death in the right way.

Emotions may be experienced as bodily changes. They may become very worried about being sick or getting hurt. There may be difficulties with sleep or eating. They may exhibit behaviors that seem more juvenile than their maturational level.

It's important for caregivers to recognize and understand these grief reactions in their children. Offer them opportunities to talk about their thoughts and feelings –and to air their worries. You can support your children by listening closely, sharing your own feelings, and normalizing their grief. You can help them see that you will move forward in your lives together, experiencing sadness about your loss, but stronger for having found new ways to be together and support each other. You can still have hopes and dreams for your future.

High School Children

Teenagers often have an adult-like understanding that death is not reversible. They can understand the universality and inevitability of death. In general, they are more logical in their thinking and better able to imagine the future than younger children. Teenagers emotions are more like adults. However, it is not uncommon for teenagers to regress in their behaviors when dealing with the death of a loved one and experience heightened levels of sadness and yearning and are also likely to experience waves of intense sadness. Other painful emotions, including, anxiety, anger and guilt are also very common.

Teenagers may be focused on close friends and romantic partners. They may turn to these peers rather than family members for social support. They need parents and caregivers to be supportive and available but also willing to give them space and respect their need to grieve in their own way.

For teenagers, emotions are sometimes aversive and may influence excessive risk taking behaviors. Parents and caregivers need to be on the look-out for this and clearly need to intervene to keep their teenager safe.

Parents and caregivers of teens need to respect their independence while being present and supportive when their child is available. As with younger children, it's important to keep lines of communication open, to normalize grief in its different forms and to share feelings and honor their deceased friend or family member together. It's also important to maintain boundaries in a reasonable way. It's still important to follow the principle of ignoring behavior that is annoying or obnoxious and intervening in when behavior that is dangerous or destructive is occurring.