



Kansas Infant Death and SIDS Network

Children's Grief Reactions to the Death of a Loved One: What to Expect

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Grief is an expression of loss. Mourning a loss is normal and appropriate for people of all ages, including children, who are no strangers to unhappy circumstances. Despite our efforts to shield them, they know what it means to be mad, sad, guilty, afraid, and lonely. To deny them the right to display natural reactions to death is to deny and prolong the process of healing.

There is nothing wrong if children exhibit some of the following emotions. And there is nothing wrong if they don't. Always remember that children's responses keep changing. Sometimes they may not even know what they are feeling. Some of these varied and even contradictory reactions can include:

Shock and Denial

Children may say, "I don't believe it. It's not true." Numbness or shock, a natural reaction to loss, can take many forms. In a state of shock, the survivor may say "It's just a terrible dream." Or, someone may discuss the loved one in the present rather than the past tense. The room of the loved one may be left intact in anticipation of that person's return. Children may say, "Why are you putting him in the box?" or "How is he going to get out and see me?"

Young people have particular difficulty facing reality. I was once called to a home where a girl's father had just died. When the daughter returned home, she was told the sad news. Casually she said, "Oh, he died." Then she asked, after a pause: "Is it all right if I go out and play?" I considered the child to be uncaring and thought: "Didn't she really love her father?" It was not until later that I realized that the impact of death does not immediately penetrate the minds and hearts of survivors.

Children may grieve even longer than adults, but perhaps not initially, when there is still a sense of unreality about the death.

A child may look unaffected because they are trying to defend themselves against the death by pretending it has not really happened. The parent may be relieved: "Isn't it lucky! I'm sure they miss their grandfather, but they don't seem to be really bothered by it." However, a lack of response may signify that the child has found the loss too great to accept and pretends secretly that the loved one is still alive.

The fact that you and your children go through moments of denial need not indicate an abnormal mourning reaction. The pain may be momentarily forgotten. Then, like a sudden storm, anguish floods in. Temporary forgetfulness enables a person to put aside the morbid, upsetting, and depressing aspects of death by focusing on the more constructive issues of the business of living.

When a child asks, "but isn't Daddy coming home," say gently and lovingly, "I know it's hard, but Daddy is dead and as much as we want him here, we can't bring him back to life."

Anger and Resentment

It is not abnormal for a child who has lost a sibling to say, "Sometimes I hate my sister for dying. Nothing's the same anymore. She's ruined everything." From denial, "No, not me", children may turn in anger and ask, "Why me?" The sense of helplessness turns to bitterness, and they may become irritable and difficult to manage.

A first impulse of an enraged individual is to lash out at those who are perceived to have caused the suffering. It is natural to wish to retaliate against those who have hurt us. Adults understand this need to vent their hostility, yet often they won't tolerate the same behavior in their children.

If a child does lash out, do not react to her/his anger with threats of further punishment. The child has enough guilt and pain. Instead, approach them with patience and respect. Listen as they tell you about their fears and resentments. If you say, "How can you speak about your poor, dead sister that way?" you will bring the dialogue to a speedy and unsatisfactory conclusion.

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Never scold children for feelings. Never make them feel ashamed of their emotions. Never tell them that they should have only good thoughts about the person who has died. If you and your children cannot recall unhappy memories of the loved one, then you may not yet have accepted the reality of death.

Resentment is a natural part of the grieving process and helps to express anguish and frustration at the curtailment of a life so precious. Bottling up anger causes greater stresses and leads to depression.

Guilt and Recrimination

Guilt takes many forms. It can be manifested outwardly through aggression and hostility or it can be turned inward, blaming oneself.

There is a degree of guilt involved in almost every death. Kids may react with “Why did I?” and/or “Why didn’t I?” do something or perhaps with “Why didn’t you...?” By projecting guilt on someone else, children absolve themselves of blame. Or, guilt may be turned inward and cause depression. This can manifest itself when children are no longer able to focus on schoolwork. Unresolved grief also takes the form of withdrawal, delinquency, excessive excitability, self-pity, and defiance.

Children are more likely to feel guilt than are adults. In children’s experience, bad things happen when they are naughty. If they received good grades, they are rewarded. On the other hand, when they lash out at a sibling, they may be punished. The “desertion” of a loved one is often seen as a retribution for wrongdoing. They search their minds for the “bad thing” for which they are being punished. Scars may last for years, even for a lifetime if the guilt is not resolved.

Let children understand that nothing they did, said or thought had anything to do with the death. You might emphasize, “Perhaps you were naughty at times. All people aren’t good all the time. But nothing you did or thought makes a person die.”

Sometimes, in an attempt to fight off unhappy thoughts, we may idealize the person, becoming obsessed with only the good qualities of the one who died. We may try to compensate for the loss of a loved one by assuming their characteristics and mannerisms.

Sadness and Depression

It is understandable for a grieving child to say, “I don’t want to play,” or “I feel so empty.” Others may experience it as, “I don’t feel well,” or “I can’t eat.” A child may have trouble sleeping, a symptom of sadness.

With the loss of a loved one, life may seem to have no purpose. The slightest effort can leave grieving children exhausted. They become especially susceptible to illness – the body’s reaction to the tragedy is their life. Psychologically they may feel torn apart with their nerves on fire. Some can’t stop sobbing, sometimes for no apparent reason.

Allow them to cry. Tears are wet and warm; they help to wash away feelings of frustration, sadness and anger. But be aware that tears are not the only measure of a child’s grief. Unfortunately, the crying, boisterous child receives the most sympathy. Less demonstrative youngsters also need adult attention and support.

Children will begin to work through the grieving process when they painfully accept the reality of death, when they reorganize their life around new circumstances and begin to reestablish normal relationships and activities. And always, they need physical demonstrations of love and support. For children, no crisis is more stressful than the loss of a loved one and the need to adjust to a new situation of life.

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