

HOW KIDS GRIEVE

Grief Behaviors of Children and Teens:

1. Afraid of the dark
2. Afraid to go to bed
3. Afraid of hospitals, physicians or their offices
4. Repeated illnesses
5. Clinging to parent or guardian
6. Changes in school work
7. Intense anger at self or others
8. Nightmares
9. Tantrums
10. Fighting
11. Hurtful behavior to self
12. Hurtful behavior to others
13. Destruction of property
14. Over or under eating
15. Bed wetting
16. Cruelty to animals
17. Withdrawal from family or friends
18. Obsession with death
19. Experimentation with sex
20. Use of drugs, alcohol or cigarettes
21. Difficulty concentrating
22. Oversleeping
23. Difficulty sleeping

A Circle of Support for Grieving Families

The number one way to predict the manner in which a child will grieve is by observing the parent(s) and how they grieve. If a parent is open and honest about his grieving process, the child/teen is more likely to as well.

Kids grieve physically, emotionally, cognitively (the way they think), socially and spiritually.

They view death and respond to it according to their developmental stage. Kids will revisit the loss over and over as they acquire new ways of thinking.

Young children have magical thinking. Cause and affect are not clear to them. They often believe thoughts, wishes and behaviors have power. Guilt associated with a false cause and effect can be heavy laden to the child. Explore their understanding of what really happened and why the person/pet died.

The young child does not understand the permanency, finality or inevitability of death. Death often comes in the form of a person (monster, bogeyman, bad person, etc.). They have a limited vocabulary and limited life experiences to help them cope with the pain. Some questions and statements will be heard over and over as they come to an understanding of what has happened and how it affects them. Be as patient as possible.

The older child starts to understand the true meaning of death. They may be fascinated by the physical state of the dead and the process of dying. Regressing to a safer period of time remains common.

A teenager understands the meaning of death fully. They begin to struggle with the unknowns about death. They have powerful "what if's", "if only's" and "why's". They have issues relating to a need to fit in, peer pressure, feeling different, etc. Children, but especially teens, hate to be different! Recognize this.

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Kids grieve in small doses. They can only handle the pain for short periods of time. At one moment they may be asking questions about the person who died or the death itself and two minutes later be laughing. This is normal.

Play is essential to their ability to explore their pain and move towards healing. Adult observation of play may very well share information about their pain never before realized.

Dealing with friends can be very uncomfortable and scary. Ask about how their friends are responding to them. Some friends will back away and avoid the griever while new ones may step forward to support them.

Kids are protective of others just as adults are. They are great at hiding their pain when they feel they are hurting someone. What they don't realize is that the pain is there no matter what and that sharing the pain can lighten the load.

A Number of Factors Influence Grief:

- Age of the griever
- Age of the deceased
- Relationship with the deceased
- Circumstances of the death
- Culture
- Religious/spiritual beliefs
- Prior losses
- Coping strategies
- First vs. subsequent losses
- Secondary losses associated with the death
- Availability of support

Kids need to say "goodbye". It does not have to be in a verbal way. It can be in any manner that fits for the child/teen and the situation. It may come in the form of a letter, poem, drawing, song played, gift given, prayer said, etc. It is the most common regret that children report. Being unable to give a "goodbye, or "see you later" can cause years and years of anger, resentment, and/or guilt. These emotions may stifle or block the grieving process for a very long time.

A pet's death may be the first loss experienced by a child. Take advantage by educating her about death and grief. "Teachable moments" allow one to prepare the child/teen about the grieving process in a situation where there may be less of an emotional attachment.

Provide honest praise as they move through their journey of grief. Help the child/teen to recognize their effective, healthy coping strategies. Keeping in touch through the years as they grieve emotionally, spiritually, cognitively, physically and socially is vital as they explore the death and grieving process over and over. Like adults, they will never "get over" the death. The impact of the life and death of the deceased will forever be a part of who they are.