

Good Grief

It happens in every family at some point; death comes, taking some beloved person out of the circle. Adults may be overwhelmed with their own loss. But even at this most difficult time, they have to find the resources to support their children in grieving as well.

Child developmentalists tell us that even the youngest children experience loss right along with their families. They just experience it differently.

Infants get much of their information about the world by reading their parents' faces. When those faces are streaked with tears and contorted in pain, infants know that something significant is happening.

Infants who are surrounded by loss feel stress. If the one who has died was a part of her regular life, a baby will feel the loss of that person. Babies don't understand death, but they do understand separation from loved ones and they react to separation through crying, body language and disruption in sleeping and eating.

Toddlers understand much language, but have no concept of death. They only understand that people around them are upset, and that makes them feel out-of-control and frightened. They, too, will miss a loved one who has vanished from their lives, and may behave in unexpected ways during the grief process.

Preschoolers are usually interested in death and may have experienced seeing a dead animal on the street or hearing other people talk about death. What they lack is a sense of permanence about death. They may think that death is temporary and reversible and that Grandpa may be dead today but will come back again soon.

Grade school-aged children understand that death is permanent and irreversible, but they don't really believe it will ever happen to them. Children in this age group openly ask questions about death. They want to know what will happen to Aunt Sue's body. They try to understand why people die, and construct elaborate theories about how to prevent death, like "Vegetables are good for you. If my dad eats his vegetables, he'll never die."

Adolescents understand death cognitively, but they feel invincible and immortal. Their illusion is shattered when a schoolmate dies in a car wreck. As they reach for adulthood and separation from their parents, they feel vulnerable in a way that many can't face openly, and death brings that vulnerability into clear focus.

Children of every age experience real grief when someone close to them dies. Understanding that a child's development impacts her grieving process will enable adults to provide support that helps. We can answer questions honestly. We can listen to whatever kids have to say. We can hold them close or just sit nearby.

The most important concept is to recognize that children are experiencing death right along with us. And often grieving together—as a family—is the greatest comfort of all.