



SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH ILLNESS AND LOSS

AGE	DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL	REACTIONS	WHAT HELPS
0-3	<p>Cognitively doesn't understand the changes – but notices adult reactions</p> <p>Does experience the emotion or heart experience of the changes</p> <p>Realizes when someone is missing</p>	<p>Fear of abandonment/rejection</p> <p>Crying</p> <p>Clinginess</p> <p>Anxiety</p>	<p>Consistent routines</p> <p>Minimize change</p> <p>Lots of physical contact</p> <p>Telling stories and drawing pictures</p> <p>Encourage play</p> <p>Allow participation</p> <p>Provide surrogate primary caregiver if needed</p>
3-6	<p>Believes death as reversible from tv or movies</p> <p>May equate illness or death with punishment</p> <p>Matter of fact curiosity</p> <p>Can't put feelings into words</p> <p>Emotions expressed through behavior and play</p>	<p>Regression – e.g. clinginess, thumb sucking, or toileting problems</p> <p>Increased aggression</p> <p>Uses play as a coping strategy</p> <p>Can appear unaffected, as if nothing happened</p> <p>Fearful: “Who will take care of me? Will you die”</p> <p>May ask questions repeatedly</p>	<p>Use simple words to explain</p> <p>Give choices about involvement in medical treatment or after death services</p> <p>Tolerate need to become/ behave younger</p> <p>Maintain routines</p> <p>Create big energy outlet and times for fun</p> <p>Maintain consistent discipline</p> <p>Spend time with the child</p>
6-9	<p>Understands death is irreversible</p> <p>Believing death only happens to older populations</p> <p>Magical thinking – might worry they caused illness or death in some way</p> <p>Expresses feelings through behavior, body, and play</p> <p>Fascinated by physical details</p>	<p>Anger</p> <p>Blames self – guilt</p> <p>Feels helpless and responds with increased aggression</p> <p>Reaction can be delayed</p>	<p>Set aside a daily “check-in time” to talk.</p> <p>Answer questions honestly</p> <p>Give choices about involvement in medical treatment or after death services</p> <p>Make it clear the illness/death is not their fault and not contagious (if that is true)</p> <p>Encourage outlets for big energy, lots of hugs</p>

	Family still important		Normalize feelings
9-12	<p>Very interested in biological basis of illness/death</p> <p>Wants black and white answers</p> <p>Worries and emotions may be unrecognizable to others</p> <p>May use distancing or intellectualizing as coping strategy</p> <p>Understands death is final, irreversible</p>	<p>Guilt</p> <p>Withdrawal</p> <p>May have physical symptoms – headache, stomachache, etc.</p> <p>Lack of attention</p> <p>Reluctant to admit feelings</p> <p>May ask a lot of questions</p> <p>Phobic behaviors can appear</p> <p>Fascination with details of death</p>	<p>Watch for teachable moments</p> <p>Don't be strong – be real.</p> <p>Provide truthful answers – don't shield.</p> <p>Assess areas of guilt. Assure death/illness is not their fault</p> <p>Acknowledge changes in routine</p> <p>Peer support is important</p> <p>Reassure they are safe, have people who can take care of them</p> <p>Hugs and cuddling when they initiate</p> <p>Model ways to express emotions – art, physical activities, journaling, etc.</p> <p>*Help find reputable online resources</p>
13 – Young Adult	<p>Interested in the philosophical as well as the psychological and physical</p> <p>Emotions intensified by hormones</p> <p>Wants to feel normal, as though things are the same</p> <p>Downplays the significance <i>despite</i> the significance</p> <p>Peers becoming more important but still needs family – goes back and forth</p> <p>Needs outlets to express worries and emotions</p> <p>Understands death is permanent, irreversible, universal, and inevitable</p>	<p>Lots of why questions</p> <p>Mood changes are magnified</p> <p>Acts like nothing has changed although feel like everything has changed</p> <p>May talk about what other teens and families are doing</p>	<p>Sit and dialogue. Provide information about what is happening, what to expect. Help with problem solving.</p> <p>Be an active/reflective listener. Accept and validate all emotions.</p> <p>Be available, but don't push - allow space</p> <p>Encourage physical and expressive outlets – sports, drawing, journaling, music, etc</p> <p>Encourage peer relationships</p> <p>Let teen cuddle with you if they initiate</p> <p>Encourage relationships with other trustworthy adults. Brainstorm other sources of support</p> <p>*Help find reputable online resources</p>

Information taken from *Talking with Children about Loss by Maria Trozzi: A Tiny Boat at Sea* by Izetta Smith, M.A., Pathways Center for Grief and Loss, and The Center for Grieving Children Staff

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