



CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND GRIEF – Illness and Death

Although we think of grief as being a universal human experience, children and teen's social, cognitive and emotional development, prior losses, emotional modeling by others, and their cultural environment (among other factors) can impact the way they understand and express their feelings of loss. Children, as they grow, may revisit these feelings as they achieve new developmental gains, and may re-experience their grief cyclically throughout their lives.

Early Childhood - Ages 0 through 5

The grief of young children often goes unrecognized because of their capacities to live in the moment, play easily and quickly dip in and out of emotions– traits adults do not usually associate with grief. We need to view their grief in the context of their developmental strengths and limitations: rich imaginations, and limited verbal abilities and experiences.

Young children use their imagination and other nonverbal resources to understand their loss. They are very concrete. They grieve through their play, their artistic expression, their physical movements, and their behaviors. Their imaginations help them wonder about the changes in their lives, struggle with the permanency and causes of death, and pretend the wishes they have will come true. Their limited verbal abilities and experience may cause them to ask questions about the loss repeatedly and to communicate their vulnerability through clinging, unwarranted fears, and tantrums. They may try to communicate feelings through bodily complaints such as "I'm not hungry or "my tummy hurts." We may not always understand these manifestations of their grief, but it is important we respect our lack of understanding and have faith in children's capacity to heal in their own way. Children of this age are helped greatly by simple reassurances that re-establish trust in their world: routines, structures and gentle limit setting, familiar people and places, moments of joy, stories and books, closeness to people they care about, careful explanations about what has changed and what has not, respect for their feelings, and kindness.

Ages 6 -9

Children in middle childhood have increased verbal and reasoning abilities, more social awareness, and more knowledge and experience of the world to help them make sense of their losses. Children express feelings through behavior but their increased verbal and reasoning skills allow them to articulate their feelings and thoughts more clearly, comprehend the causes and permanency of death, and ask more sophisticated questions.

Their developing social skills allow them to reach out more significantly to trusted adults and peers. This also creates an awareness of being different from others, and the effect their questions and fears have on others. Magical thinking is common at this age, perhaps leading them to feel responsible for the illness or death because of thoughts, actions, or wishes they may have had. The capacity for guilt is developing. Understanding of cause and effect is forming; so some understanding of serious illness and death may result in fears and worries.

Though older, children of this age still seek reassurance in order to regain balance in their now chaotic world. They may revert to younger behaviors, have increased aggression, seek closeness to caregivers, have many fears, and yearn for routine and familiarity. It is most important that children this age be given honest information about the loss and the changes that are happening in every aspect of their lives. It is a time when trusted adults outside the family can help tremendously by answering questions a child may have. Staff at school or family friends may have the energy to listen, answer questions, and speak openly with children, which can be a source of support for families. Since children of this age do not like to appear different from their peers, joining a peer support group or reading books about loss can offer the reassurance that they are not alone.

Ages 9-12

Independence is developing as relationships with peers increase. Questions such as “will we have to move?” or “what will we do for vacation this year?” can be their concerns. Life is seen in a black and white manner. It is most important that children this age be given honest information about the loss and changes happening in every aspect of their lives. This age often separate right from wrong, and illness or death may be viewed as a punishment. Worries and anxieties may go unrecognized as pseudo-adult like behavior is displayed by the child. There is a tendency to intellectualize and act as if it doesn't matter. A fear of abandonment may keep them on this cognitive level, so support and availability by supportive adults is necessary. Help them regain balance through routine and structure. Trusted adults from outside the family can help support children and peer support groups can offer reassurance they are not alone and reduce feelings of difference and isolation. Physical complaints, fearfulness, denial, or anxiety are common responses.

Adolescence – Ages 13 – Young Adulthood

Adolescence is a time of startling growth and change, which accompanies each young person in their grief process. Their physical, emotional and cognitive abilities resemble those of an adult, yet they are still young people that maintain many of the aspects of childhood. Adolescents have the ability to comprehend the permanence and enormity of present and past losses and to think toward the future without the loved one. Yet, like younger children, they benefit from reassurance, familiarity and honest communication. To experience a loss in adolescence is particularly difficult because all the developmental tasks, such as the need to be independent, to forge a life outside the family, to experience rites of passage (such as driving and working) are all challenged by the vulnerability, the emotional dependence, and the uncertainty and chaos that loss can bring. It is not uncommon for teens to question their religious beliefs as they grapple with feelings of anger, sadness and worry.

A major challenge in adolescence for caring adults is how and when to offer support. Because their peer group is central, they may need to seek support there rather than in the family circle. Adults often need simply be there, waiting for opportunities to nurture and be part of a teen's world. A non-judgmental adult outside of the family who can tolerate hearing the questions and concerns of the adolescent can be of great help to them.

It is particularly meaningful for teens with their developed talents and awareness to plan and participate in rituals and ceremonies. It gives them an opportunity to grieve with their peers, and to be reassured that each unique life (including their own) has great meaning. At this age, it is especially important for adults to understand how volatile a time this is for any teen and to accept that sometimes teens may need to delay their grief for a more stable time.

Sources: Helen McGlaflin and Pathways Center for Grief and Loss