

Helping
**CHILDREN AND
TEENS**

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Children and teens can benefit from support as they wrestle with their grief. This booklet provides adults with practical strategies for helping children and teens as they grieve. I hope it helps you and your family as you mourn the death of a loved one.

Sincerely,
Jason Troyer PhD



Understanding Death at Different Ages

A child's understanding of grief and death varies widely based on their age and experience. Below I describe the typical level of understanding that children and teens have at specific ages.

Preschoolers (0-3 years old)

Simply put, if a child is old enough to develop a relationship with someone then the child is old enough to feel loss after their death. Children of this age have little understanding of the concept of death. It is normal to have to frequently repeat your explanations for why the child can no longer see the deceased loved one. It is normal for children to express grief in their play, including pretending the deceased is still alive. Much of the distress experienced by children of this age group comes from the disruption in their routines. Maintaining some of their routines is especially helpful for young children.

Children (4-10 years old)

This is the age range when children begin to understand the irreversibility (e.g., death is final) and universality of death (e.g. we all die). Many children in this age range may believe that death is tied to their actions or thoughts. Death may seem arbitrary or haphazard to them, so they are trying to determine why some people die while others don't. As a result of their confusion, they may use incorrect logic (often in a self-blaming way) to make sense of death.

Children may express grief reactions (including sadness, confusion, anger, etc.) through play. They may also include funerals or other death rituals in their play. This allows a child to have control of the event and their reaction to it. These are usually normal reactions, especially after attending a funeral or other death ritual.

Pre-Teens & Teens (11-18 years old)

Teens & pre-teens often have many questions about the physical processes of death, different causes of death, and the rationale behind various grief rituals. This is also the age when their questions may be related to the broader implications of death. For example, an eleven-year-old may ask, "Will we have to move?" or "Will we lose all our money?" after her father dies.



Teens and pre-teens will have a good understanding of the basic concepts of death, but may not recognize that others are also feeling the pain of grief. This may appear as if they are self-centered in their grief. Just as they may believe that the anguish of their first breakup is something only they can understand, they may also view their grief as unique.

Revisiting Grief Throughout Childhood

Children may re-experience grief in various ways as they grow older. As their ability to reason becomes more complex they will recognize new losses. For example, a 16-year-old whose mother died when she was 8 may find herself missing her mother's advice and companionship as she begins dating. A 9-year-old who is completing a family history project may be frustrated that he doesn't have more memories of his sibling who died when he was 2. This process is a challenging, although normal, aspect of grief.

Common Grief Reactions

Sadness

Sadness may take different forms in children and teens. In addition to crying, children's sadness may also be expressed in their play or through frustration or anger. Support the child or teen as they express sadness and reinforce that it is a normal and healthy process. On the other hand, don't compel them to be sad simply because you think they should be. Children will typically express their own grief reactions in their own time and style.

Fear & Insecurity

Children thrive on routines; few events cause more disruption to routines of children than the death of an important person. Children often respond to major disruptions in their lives with feelings of fear and insecurity. The greater the disruption, the more likely the child is to experience these reactions.

Fear and insecurity are especially common after the death of a parent or a sibling. Fear and insecurity may be expressed as anxiousness, being ‘clingy,’ checking on adults to make sure they are there, and having difficulty saying goodbye in everyday situations (e.g, leaving for school, etc.). As much as possible, attempt to continue some routines. If a child is accustomed to reading with an adult before bed, try to maintain this. When a routine must be changed, explain why and ask for the child’s input on how to make the new routine feel more familiar.

Anger & Acting Out

Grief is often expressed as anger, frustration, or irritability. Some of this is a result of wanting to blame someone for the loss. For other children, this may be a result of not having the language or opportunity to express grief. Don’t be surprised if children or teens have more tantrums, disobey, or misbehave in other ways. The best approach is to maintain most rules, but with an added dose of patience and compassion. Allowing children to misbehave, especially over a long period of time, simply because they experienced a loss is not helpful. Try to be consistent, yet empathetic.



Guilt & Self-Blame

Children often feel guilt and even responsibility following the death of a loved one. Children, especially younger children, may mistakenly assign cause-effect relationships when there is actually no connection. For example, a four-year-old may mistakenly think her father died because she didn't pick up her room. It can be difficult for a child to let go of their sense of responsibility for the death. Consistently reassuring a child that her actions had nothing to do with her loved one's death is the best strategy.

Helping Children & Teens Remember

Help children and teens remember their loved one through concrete rituals and activities like these:

- ❖ Create a photo album, video, song compilation, or memory box
- ❖ Visit the gravesite or other places of significance
- ❖ Give the child items associated with the deceased (a watch, pocketknife, jewelry, items of clothing, etc.)
- ❖ Provide a journal to record their thoughts, feelings, and reactions
- ❖ Do something in memory of the deceased (e.g., fundraiser, an activity the deceased liked, etc.)



Important Reminders

- ❖ Invite, but don't force, a child to participate in rituals, reminiscing, and other activities.
- ❖ Recognize that children will have different levels of understanding based on their cognitive development; death is a more complex concept than most adults realize.
- ❖ Children look to adults they trust and respect for guidance on how to grieve. Adults who avoid grieving to be 'strong for the child' are teaching a child that they should keep their feelings bottled up.
- ❖ A child's continuing connection to the deceased person is often healthy and normal; there is no need to 'cut ties' or try to force a child to forget them.
- ❖ Children can benefit from planning and participating in meaningful grief rituals.
- ❖ Be patient with children throughout the process of understanding, grieving, and reacting to their loss. You will likely need to repeat some concepts many times.
- ❖ There is no set time period for grieving the death of a loved one, but children's grief often lasts longer than most people expect.
- ❖ Most children and teens can adjust to the loss of a loved one with the assistance of friends and family, but some may benefit from professional assistance.

Need More Help?

Visit www.GriefPlan.com for helpful videos and articles to help you heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. These resources cover topics such as:

- ❖ Helping children as they grieve
- ❖ Healing after the loss of a spouse, parent, child, and other loved ones
- ❖ Dealing with traumatic losses due to suicide, overdose, and accidents
- ❖ Recognizing signs that you may need professional help
- ❖ A step-by-step video program to help you through your grief

About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer earned his master's degree in counseling and his doctorate in counseling psychology. He is a published author, grief researcher, and former college professor and therapist.

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