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In the past, children were thought to be miniature adults and were expected to behave as adults. It is now understood that there are differences in the ways in which children and adults mourn. Unlike adults, bereaved children do not experience continual and intense emotional and behavioral grief reactions.

Children may seem to show grief only occasionally and briefly, but in reality a child's grief usually lasts longer than that of an adult. Mourning in children may need to be addressed again and again as the child gets older. As the surviving child grows, he or she will think about the loss repeatedly, especially during important times in his or her life, such as going to camp, graduating from school, getting married, or giving birth to his or her own children. This longer period of grief is due to the fact that the child's ability to experience intense emotions is limited.

A child's grief may be influenced by his or her age, personality, stage of development, earlier experiences with death, and his or her relationship with the deceased. The surroundings, cause of death, family members' ability to communicate with one another and to continue as a family after the death can also affect grief. The child's ongoing need for care, the child's opportunity to share his or her feelings and memories, the parent's ability to cope with stress, and the child's steady relationships with other adults are also other factors that may influence grief.

Children do not react to loss in the same ways as adults. Grieving children may not show their feelings as openly as adults. Grieving children may not withdraw and dwell on the person who died. But instead may throw themselves into activities (for example, they may be sad one minute and playful the next). Often families think the child "doesn't really understand" or has "gotten over" the death. Neither is true: children's minds protect them from what is too powerful for them to handle. Children's grieving periods are shortened because they can not think through their thoughts and feelings like adults. Also, children have trouble putting their feelings about grief into words. Instead, his or her behavior "speaks" for the child. Strong feelings of anger and fears of abandonment or death may show up in the behavior of grieving children. Children often play death games as a way of working out their feelings and anxieties. These games are familiar to the children and provide safe opportunities to express their feelings.

### **Children's Grief and Developmental Stages -**

Children at different stages of development have different

understandings of death and the events near death.

#### **Infants -**

Infants do not recognize death, but feelings of loss and separation are part of developing an awareness of death. Children who have been separated from their mother may be sluggish, quiet, unresponsive to a smile or a coo, undergo physical changes (for example, weight loss, be less active and sleep less).

#### **Age 2-3 years -**

Children at this age often confuse death with sleep and may experience anxiety as early as age 3. They may stop talking and appear to feel overall distress.

#### **Age 3-6 years -**

At this age children see death as a kind of sleep; the person is alive, but only in a limited way. The child cannot fully separate death from life. Children may think that the person is still living, even though he or she might have been buried, and ask questions about the deceased (for example, how does the deceased eat, go to the toilet, breathe, or play?) Young children know that death occurs physically, but think it is temporary, reversible, and not final. The child's concept of death may involve magical thinking. For example, the child may think that his or her thoughts can cause another person to become sick or die. Grieving children under 5 may have trouble eating, sleeping, and controlling bladder and bowel functions.

#### **Age 6-9 years -**

Children at this age are commonly very curious about death, and may ask questions about what happens to one's body when it dies. Death is thought of as a person or spirit separate from the person who was alive, such as a skeleton, ghost, angel of death, or "bogey man". They may see death as final and frightening but as something that happens mostly to old people (and not to themselves). Grieving children can become afraid of school, have learning problems, develop antisocial or aggressive behaviors, become overly concerned about their own health (for example, developing symptoms of imaginary illness), or withdraw from others. Or, children this age can become too attached and clinging. Boys usually become more aggressive and destructive (for example, acting out in school), instead of openly showing their sadness. Children may feel abandoned by both their deceased parent and their surviving parent because the surviving parent is grieving and is unable to emotionally support the child.

### **Ages 9 and older -**

By the time a child is 9 years old, death is known to be unavoidable and is not seen as a punishment. By the time a child is 12 years old, death is seen as final and something that happens to everyone.

In American society, many grieving adults withdraw and do not talk to others. Children, however, often talk to the people around them (even strangers) to see the reactions of others and to get clues for their own responses. Children may ask confusing questions. For example, a child may ask, "I know grandpa died, but when will he come home?" This is a way of testing reality and making sure the story of the death has not changed.

### **Other Issues for Grieving Children -**

Children's grief expresses three issues:

- Did I cause the death to happen?
- Is it going to happen to me?
- Who is going to take care of me?

#### **Did I cause the death to happen?**

Children often think that they have magical powers. If a mother says in irritation, "You'll be the death of me" and later dies, her child may wonder if he or she actually caused the mother's death. Also, when children argue, one may say (or think), "I wish you were dead." Should that child die, the surviving child may think that his or her thoughts actually caused the death.

#### **Is it going to happen to me?**

The death of another child may be especially hard for a child. If the child thinks that the death may have been prevented (by either a parent or a doctor) the child may think that he or she could also die.

#### **Who is going to take care of me?**

Since children depend on parents and other adults to take care of them, a grieving child may wonder who

will care for him or her after the death of an important person.

### **Grieving Children: Treatment -**

A child's grieving process may be made easier by being open and honest with the child about death, using direct language, and incorporating the child into memorial ceremonies for the person who died.

#### **Explanation of death -**

Not talking about death (which indicates that the subject is off limits) does not help children learn to cope with loss. When discussing death with children, explanations should be simple and direct. Each child should be told the truth using as much detail as he or she is able to understand. The child's questions should be answered honestly and directly. Children need to be reassured about their own security (they often worry that they will also die, or that their surviving parent will go away). Children's questions should be answered, making sure that the child understands the answers.

#### **Correct language -**

A discussion about death should include the proper words, such as "cancer," "died," and "death." Substitute words or phrases (for example, "passed away," "he is sleeping," or "we lost him") should never be used because they can confuse children and lead to misunderstandings.

#### **Planning memorial ceremonies -**

When a death occurs, children can and should be included in the planning and participation of memorial ceremonies. These events help children (and adults) remember loved ones. Children should not be forced to be involved in these ceremonies, but they should be encouraged to take part in those portions of the events with which they feel most comfortable. If the child wants to attend the funeral, wake, or memorial service, he or she should be given in advance a full explanation of what to expect.

### **References and resources for grieving children -**

There are many helpful books and videos that can be shared with grieving children.

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