

# PATHWAYS CENTER *for* GRIEF & LOSS

## UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF GRIEVING CHILDREN

### **1-3 Years Old**

Children react to the emotions around them. They won't understand, but they will react. They don't understand permanence, so they will ask the same questions repeatedly. They receive security from hearing the same answer to the same question. They cannot grasp abstractions such as heaven. They will worry about who will care for them and may try to communicate feelings via bodily complaints such as "I'm not hungry," or "My tummy aches."

### **3-5 Years Old**

Death is viewed as temporary and equated with sleeping. Simple questions require simple answers. Regression and increased aggression are common. It's still hard to discern between a short absence and a long one but the separation is difficult. They will repeat the same questions as they try to understand.

### **6-8 Years Old**

Six year olds may still view death as reversible – watch for magical thinking. They may somehow feel responsible for the death through thoughts, actions or wishes. At this age the capacity for guilt is developing. Children express feelings through behavior. Cause and effect is forming; there is some understanding of what death involves and this may result in a fear of death. Children in this age range may fear forgetting so may identify with the deceased in order to remember them. They may personify – put into monster form to grasp – the supernatural and are often fascinated by physical facts. Denial, constant questions, feelings of guilt and feeling very different from others are common reactions. Reassurance and a sense of security are important.

### **9-12 Years Old**

Independence is developing as relationships with peers increase in importance and clearer understanding about death is forming. A lot of questions and perhaps fears related to the result of death are common. Secondary issues such as "Will we have to move?" or "What will we do about vacation this year?" are of concern. Life is seen in a black and white manner. Children this age often separate right from wrong, and death may be viewed as punishment. Grief may go unrecognized as pseudo-adult like behavior is assumed. There is a tendency to intellectualize and act as if it doesn't matter. A fear of abandonment keeps them on this cognitive level, so stress your support and availability to them. Physical complaints, tendency of fearfulness, denial, or anxiety are common responses.

(over)

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

## REACTIONS

## SUGGESTIONS

### **1-3 Years**

Sense adults reactions  
Won't remember the deceased  
Cannot grasp concept of death  
Depends on nonverbal communications  
Realizes when someone is missing

Fear of abandonment/rejection  
Crying  
Clinginess  
Anxiety

Tell a story  
Draw a picture  
Encourage play – dolls, puppets  
Coloring books on life cycles  
Provide physical comfort  
Concrete language  
Maintain routine  
Minimize change  
Allow participation

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### **3-5 Years**

View death as temporary  
Question cause of death  
Can't grasp concept of heaven  
May equate loss with punishment  
Matter-of-fact curiosity  
Can't put feelings into words

Regression – e.g. thumb sucking or toilet training problems  
Increased aggression  
Escape into play  
Can appear unaffected  
Fearful  
“Who will take care of me?”

Model your own grief  
Brief, honest explanations  
Avoid euphemisms (“dead” not “sleeping,” etc.  
Read books to explain  
Discipline consistently  
Spend time with the child  
Maintain routine  
Give child choice to attend funeral

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### **6-8 Years**

Magical thinking  
Unrealistic fears  
Fascinated by physical details  
Grasps finality of death  
Expresses feeling through behavior

Anger  
Blames self – guilt  
Feels helpless and responds with increased aggression  
Reaction can be delayed

Set aside a daily “check-in” time to talk  
Physical touch  
Self-disclosure of similarities  
Normalize feelings  
Discuss life cycles

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### **9-12 Years**

Realizes irreversible nature of death  
Realizes the disruptive changes that result  
Wants black and white answers  
Grief may be unrecognizable

Guilt  
Withdrawal  
May have physical symptoms – headache, stomach-ache, etc.  
Lack of concentration  
Reluctant to admit feelings

Provide truthful answers – don't shield  
Assess areas of guilt  
Acknowledge changes in routine  
Connect with other peers who have had loss  
Suggest ways to release emotions  
Make collage to represent loved one

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