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.

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<th>DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES</th>
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| 1-3 Years            | Fear of abandonment/rejection  
                     | Crying  
                     | Clinginess  
                     | Anxiety  |
| Sense adults reactions  
 Won’t remember the deceased  
 Cannot grasp concept of death  
 Depends on nonverbal communications  
 Realizes when someone is missing | 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 |
| 3-5 Years            | Regression – e.g. thumb sucking or toilet training problems  
                     | Increased aggression  
                     | Escape into play  
                     | Can appear unaffected  
                     | Fearful  
                     | “Who will take care of me?”  |
| 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 | 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 |
| 6-8 Years            | Anger  
                     | Blames self – guilt  
                     | Feels helpless and responds with increased aggression  
                     | Reaction can be delayed  |
| Magical thinking  
 Unrealistic fears  
 Fascinated by physical details  
 Grasps finality of death  
 Expresses feeling through behavior | Set aside a daily “check-in” time to talk  
 Physical touch  
 Self-disclosure of similarities  
 Normalize feelings  
 Discuss life cycles |
| 9-12 Years           | Guilt  
                     | Withdrawal  
                     | May have physical symptoms – headache, stomach-ache, etc.  
                     | Lack of concentration  
                     | Reluctant to admit feelings  |
| Realizes irreversible nature of death  
 Realizes the disruptive changes that result  
 Wants black and white answers  
 Grief may be unrecognizable | 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 |