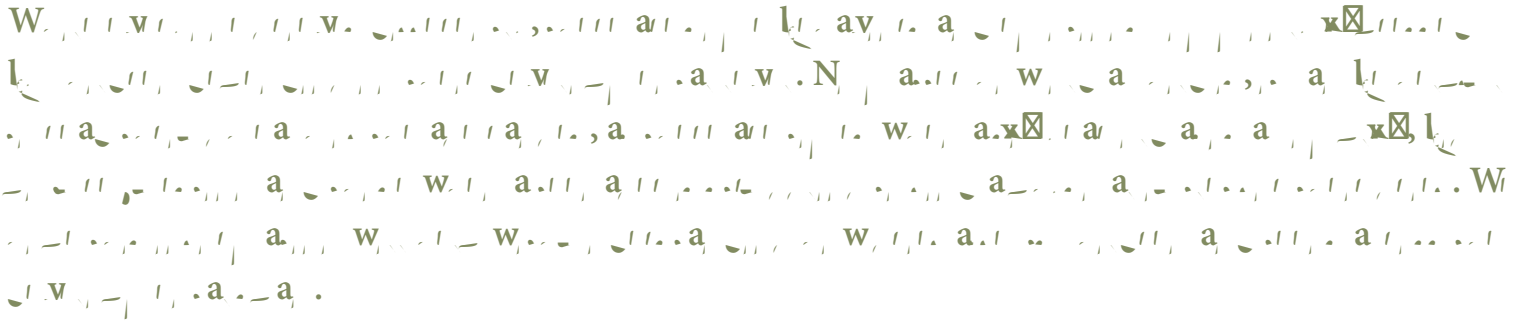


Developmental Responses to Grief

from the Dougy Center: the National Center for Grieving Children & Families



Ages 2-4 years old

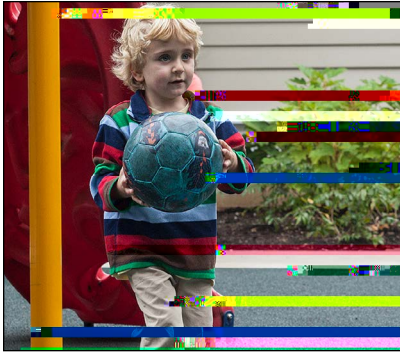


Photo credit: Ecce & Ecce Photography

Developmental stage

Children this age don't fully understand that death is permanent and universal. They are most likely to express themselves through their behavior and play.

Concept of death

Young children see death as reversible and are starting to wonder if death happens to everyone. You might hear questions like: "My mom died? When will she be home?" and "Will you die too? What about me?"

Common responses to grief

- General anxiety
- Crying
- Irregular sleep
- Clinginess/need to be held
- Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers
- Repetitive questions
- Behavior regression – may need help with tasks they've already learned

Ways to help

- Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day.
- Provide short, honest explanation of the death. "Mommy died. Her body stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- Provide opportunities for play.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Do you want hot or cold cereal?"
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.

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Common responses to grief

- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions – How? Why? Who else?
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Nightmares
- Regressive behaviors – may need help with tasks they've already learned (can't tie shoes, bedwetting)
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, body pain

Ways to help

- Explain the death honestly using concrete language. "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Be prepared for repetitive questions.
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.
- Allow children to talk about the experience and ask questions.
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"

Ages 8-12 years old

Developmental stage

Elementary school age children may still be concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief. They often start making closer connections with friends and activities outside their home and family.

Concept of death

Children this age begin to understand that death is permanent and start thinking

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Common responses to grief

- Express big energy through behavior sometimes seen as acting out
- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others - “the world is no longer safe”
- Worries about something bad happening again
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Physical complaints: headaches, stomach aches, body pain
- Using play and talk to recreate the event
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry
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- Increased risk taking: drugs/alcohol, unsafe behaviors, reckless driving
- Inability to concentrate (school difficulties)/pushing themselves to succeed and be perfect
- Difficulty sleeping, exhaustion
- Lack of appetite/eating too much
- Unpredictable and at times intense emotional reactions: anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- Confusion over role identity in the family
- Attempts to take on caregiving/parent role with younger siblings and other adults
- May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light

Ways to help

- Reinforce assurances of safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns.
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed.
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away.
- Answer questions honestly.
- *Reference: Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2005; 44(11):1225-1232*

Our Mission

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 30,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit www.dougy.org or www.tdcbookstore.org or call 503.775.5683.



The Dougy Center

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