



A child old enough to love is old enough to grieve.

Loss from a Child's Perspective

Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster

A child old enough to love is old enough to grieve. However, death means different things to children of different ages. Children are affected by any significant loss, often very deeply, because their coping mechanisms are just developing. What is important to ask is: "What does this loss mean to this child, at this time in their life?"

For infants, their limited awareness means that physical contact, warmth and consistency creates security. The absence of a nurturer poses a threat to survival, resulting in fears.

At 2-4 years, a child still has no concept of the permanence of death, but their fears are more numerous. The young child may believe that "Mom will come back" and may continue to act as if the dead person is still alive.

Between ages 5-9, a child sees death as coming from an external source... a bogeyman, or angel who comes to take people away, an enemy or assailant. Children may regard death as something to outwit, rationalizing "if I am good or do the right things I will be able to reverse this." If we do not make children of this age a part of what is happening, or keep it a secret, they may assume somehow they are responsible.

At ages 9-12, the child accepts that death is the end of life, irreversible, and is more concerned with the consequences of death... "Who will take care of me? Will we have to move? Will Dad marry again?" They may present a facade of independence and coping, and want to comfort a surviving parent or family member. They may even try to assume the roles of the person who has died.

Older children often need help to express their grief, especially over the loss of a parent. Teenagers experience more intense grief, yet struggle not to show it, especially in front of their peers. Angry at the death, they may adopt a "Why should I care" attitude and engage in reckless or dangerous behaviors to show they really don't care or to try to prove they are immortal.

One teenager said: *"I was afraid to talk about how I felt to my mother because I knew she would start crying. Then my older brother would get mad at me for upsetting mom. So, I kept my feelings to myself, and pretty soon I was afraid to say anything to anyone."*

Children do not stop grieving until they have gone through all of their developmental levels. Each stage adds new learning. Regardless of the stage, special care is necessary when talking to children about death:

- When describing the death of a loved one, use simple direct language.
- Be honest. Never teach a child something they will later have to unlearn.
- Allow children to express all their emotions.
- Listen to children, don't just talk to them.
- Don't expect the child to react immediately. Be patient and available.
- Understand your own adult feelings about death and grief, for until we have come to terms with it for ourselves, it will be difficult to convey a positive attitude to children. ■



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