



DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES FOR CHILDREN IN GRIEF

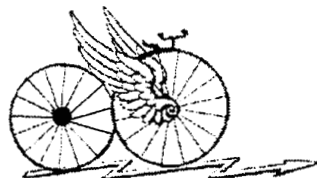
The Adolescent (13 to 19 years)

The peer group is becoming the primary support for a teenager in grief. The family remains a significant resource, but the teen is ambivalent about dependency on the family as he/she is asserting his/her independence.

Teens are fast developing their reasoning powers and use discussion as a primary form of learning and processing the significant events of their lives. They are beginning to consider concepts such as death in a more philosophical way rather than as a personal assault.

How to Help

1. Be honest with the information and your feelings about the death.
2. Be available to the teen for discussion and expression of feelings, even if you are not taken up on it. Remind the teen of your availability at regular intervals.
3. Expect to hear a teen discuss the death amidst larger issues such as the meaning of living, the unfairness in the world, etc.
4. Encourage peer support for the teen, and relationships with other adults.
5. Expect that you may not know parts of what the teen is processing about the death.
6. Allow a teen his/her defensive behavior in hiding grief, as long as it doesn't hurt him/her or others.
7. Expect that a teen may exaggerate the importance of a person who has died. Strong feelings may seem out of proportion. Allow for and accept these emotions.
8. Expect periods of prolonged sleeping and inactivity, as well as periods of highly charged and frenetic behavior.
9. Expect eating habits to fluctuate. Provide a structure for eating appetizing foods.
10. A teen's grief may manifest in physical vulnerability, illness, recklessness and accidents. Provide structure in an attempt to avoid these.
11. Provide assistance in getting a teen involved in physical outlets for his/her grief, i.e. sports, dancing, working out, etc.
12. Provide assistance in getting a teen involved in expressive outlets for his/her grief, i.e. choir, drama, crafts, etc.
13. Watch for drug and alcohol use and get professional help immediately if you suspect it.





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The Pre-Adolescent (10 to 13 years)

Language plays more a part in the pre-adolescent's grief, although the non-cognitive processes are still an important source of integration. The pre-adolescent is beginning to understand the inevitability, irreversibility and universality of death.

The pre-adolescent swings back and forth between the family and peer relationships for his/her primary source of support.

Emotions are heightened in the pre-adolescent's life by the onset of puberty. Yet emotions are often perceived as a threat to this child because they represent being younger, a state the pre-adolescent is struggling to overcome.

How to Help

1. Expect a child of this age to be in battle with his/her emotions. Respect this child's efforts to control or conceal his/her vulnerability. Be available, but don't push.
2. Expect that the pre-adolescent may feel physically ill, i.e. headaches, stomach aches, cold.
3. Encourage peer relationships and involvement. Look for peer support groups.
4. Lower your expectations of children at school, if need be. Grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy, which can affect the cognitive functioning of the brain. This can result in the loss of short-term memory and concentration. Work with teachers to tailor a child's workload.
5. Answer questions honestly and thoroughly. If the child asks for information, answer with whatever detail and technical information that seems warranted.
6. Encourage physical outlets for the child.
7. Let the child dissolve in your lap like a baby if she/he wants.





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The School-Aged Child (6 years to 10 years)



A school-aged child is still a very physical creature, processing the important events of his/her life through the body and in his/her play. Yet language is growing as a tool for the expression of feelings and the gaining of understanding. A school-aged child often thinks about death as a scary being who attacks people, similar to the villain of video games or ghost stories. This concept enables these children to believe that death can still be avoided by successful battle or escape..

A school-aged child has become more familiar with the permanence of death. This child may be fascinated with the exploration of dead insects and animals.

The family is the basis of security for a school-aged child and the major environment within which the child learns how to grieve and express his/her grief. However, peer relationships and the school environment are becoming important influences in a child's discovery of his/herself.

How to Help

1. Continue to answer children's questions honestly and repetitively.
2. Offer to include the child in the significant processes surrounding the a death in the family. Always ask a child whether he/she wants to be involved in these processes and how.
3. Clarify when a child's confused thinking inhibits a child's understanding of death, e.g.
 - death is not a punishment for a child's bad behavior.
 - death is not something that usually happens again and again if it has happened once in a family.
4. Lower your expectations of children at school, if need be. Grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy, which can affect the cognitive functioning of the brain. This can result in the loss of short-term memory and concentration. Work with teachers to tailor a child's workload.
5. Read books out loud with a child that have stories about grief.
6. Encourage sports and active play in order to lessen a child's anxiety and physical tension as a result of grieving.
7. Create a big energy corner of your house for the expression of the big energy of grief, i.e., pillows to throw.
8. Encourage art, music, dance, singing, crafts and other expressive processes.
9. Share your grief with a child. This helps model for a child how to grieve. Do not share your grief with a child if you need the child for your support. Seek your support from other adults.
10. Lots of hugs and holding help.
11. Find peer support groups for your child and for you.



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The Young Child (2 to 5 years)

A young child understands the profundity of the event when someone close has died, even though this child may not understand what death means. A young child may think the death can be reversed, or that it happened by magic or that it was the result of his/her own actions. A young child may generalize about a death—if grandma died in a hospital, all people in hospitals die; if one person in the family dies, then more people in the family will die now too.



How to Help

1. Use the simple, truthful words about the death with the young child.
2. Allow the child to ask questions over and over. When you do not know the answer, say so.
3. Allow the child to make choices to be involved in the dying process, the viewing, the service and any other opportunity to learn about what has happened in a concrete way.
4. Maintain structure and routine.
5. A child may have night sweats and scary dreams, from which they may wake up crying. Hold a child and let the child come to his/her own conclusion of the tears.
6. A child may reenact aspects of the death in his/her play. Allow for this and perhaps encourage the play by joining. A child's play is a child's way to communicate thoughts and feelings.
7. Tolerate a child's temporary need to become "younger." A child may lose ground with potty training. A child may return to sucking fingers/pacifiers. A child may become clingy or want to sleep with others. Allow for this process and, when it is time, gently challenge the child to regain lost ground.
8. Recognize that children's anger and sadness over their daily frustrations may be more intense because it includes the feelings of their grief. Hold and love a child as best you can in order to allow him/her to cry their way through it.
9. Give a young child outlets for the big energy of their grief, i.e. active play, yelling and sports.
10. Allow a child free and joyful fun. Children have a wonderful sense of taking breaks from grief. Learn from them and try to do so yourself.



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Infants (0 to 1 year old)

Babies can miss and yearn for the sound, smell, sight or feel of a mother or primary caregiver.

Babies who are grieving may become agitated, rock, thrash, cry or knock their heads. They may have difficulty eating and sleeping. They may become sick with colds or indigestion.

How to Help

1. Give a lot of physical contact and reassuring attention to the baby.
2. Maintain a baby's routine for physical needs: i.e. feedings, sleep schedules, walks, play time.
3. Hold the baby gently while the baby is agitated and crying. While the baby cries, you can say in words or in your touching and holding of the baby, "I love you. I am right here. I am sorry it hurts." Avoid, "It will be alright. You don't have to cry because I am here," etc. Let the child cry until the child is finished and comes to a place of peace.

