

Understanding What Grief and Loss Looks Like to a Preschooler...



What does grief and loss look like to a preschool-age child?

- Children do not understand death is permanent; they view grief as reversible and temporary. They confuse grief with sleeping or just being absent with belief of return.
- Children are egocentric, and may perceive it as punishment for wrong-doing or because the child had previously wished the person dead.
- Children sometimes view death as a thought of violence.
- Some children think they might catch the condition that caused the death.
- Some children think dead people live underground.

Preschoolers may exhibit these possible behaviors upon the death of a parent, peer, or other loved ones:

- May show little concern at times
- Bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, fear of dark
- Fear of separating from significant others
- May need to talk about death a lot (These repetitions make it real for the child, and he/she may say things such as, "Ben can't use his dump truck anymore cause he's dead")

Adults can do the following to help a preschool child cope with death:

- Tell them what to expect regarding the funeral, parents/family grieving
- Explain to them how things might look and what might happen
- Encourage all adults in the school to use terms "dead/death" and not phrases of "passed away", "resting", or "taken from us"
- Reassure the child regarding routines, activities, and schedules
- Keep explanations short; simple; and truthful. The explanations may need to be frequently repeated.

The 5 General Stages of Grief:

Grief is described in a series of stages, and not everyone goes through the stages of grief in the order they are listed below:

1. **Denial:** "No, it can't be! Not him/her!" This may be mixed with shock or disbelief that the event has actually occurred.
2. **Anger:** "Why him/her? Why not 'someone else'?" As the reality of the loss sinks in, other people might be blamed for the event having happened.
3. **Bargaining:** "Dear _____, if you bring him/her back again, I promise I'll be good and never get mad at him/her again." This may be associated with feelings of guilt.
4. **Depression:** "It's so hard, everything is so hard and nothing seems important anymore." Although survivors have other people for support, they may still feel very much alone and sad.
5. **Acceptance:** "Well, I don't like what's happened; (sigh) but I can't change anything about it now." This is the culmination of successful grieving when survivors accept the reality of the death.