

CHILDREN and GRIEF

Children react to loss in much the same way adults do. Children experience denial, rage, guilt, sorrow, and often, great fear. While the emotions are much the same as adults, children will “externalize” their feelings in different ways depending on their developmental age.

Do babies and toddlers mourn a significant loss? Yes. Grief may show up as irritability, changing sleep patterns, bowel and bladder disturbances, poor appetite and sometimes, difficulty in allowing themselves to be comforted.

Pre-schoolers and grade-school kids may experience the above symptoms as well as different kinds of regression, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, tantrums, or an inability to perform tasks previously mastered such as tying shoes. Children may display “denial” by simply “pretending” the loss didn’t occur (*Can’t we just say Daddy is on a trip?*). Anger often shows up as disruptive or aggressive behavior at home or school. This age group also often responds to loss with tremendous “separation anxiety.” This can take the form of refusal/fear of going to bed, to school, leaving the parent or even the home. Normal fears may be intensified. Insomnia and nightmares can be another form of separation anxiety. This response to loss is really a fear of abandonment (*Who else is going to die and leave me?*).

Like adults, children in mourning may have difficulty concentrating, and this can be reflected in falling grades. Kids also grapple with guilt and blame (*Whose fault is this?*) and may wonder if they are in some way responsible (*Did Grandma die because I was bad?*). Just as some adults need to temporarily “cocoon” themselves after a loss, some children simply withdraw showing little interest in friends or play activities. All ages can respond to grief with a range of somatic complaints; imagined “boo-boos,” headaches, tummy aches, as well as changes in appetite and sleep patterns.

Adolescents will display many of the above reactions to loss, but have an additional problem because they are in the midst of formulating their self-concept. Their very identity comes into question when an important role model or peer dies. Teens may react by hiding their emotions (denial), fighting or unruliness at school (anger), drug/alcohol abuse, promiscuity, or suicidal tendencies (depression).

What is helpful to children in grief?

- Be honest and be simple
- Allow questions
- Help kids give words to feelings
- Include kids in family discussions and rituals
- Reassure with love and attention

Sandy McCauley, *Haven Herald*, May 1996