

# THE PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER

## HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH DEATH AND GRIEF

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Unfortunately, recent events in our community and our country have forced our children to deal with loss and death. Even if not directly affected, these events have challenged our children's feelings of security and safety. The fact that death is a reality and the end of all life cycles, makes it important for us to help our children deal with it.

Children's reactions to death vary greatly depending on their stage of development and their ability to comprehend and interpret the related facts of the situation. The range of reactions can vary widely and may include:

**Emotional shock** can look like a lack of feelings about the death or loss. This helps the child detach themselves from the pain of the situation.

**Anger and acting out** reflects the child's frustration, fear and helplessness. Their outbursts may be an attempt to control events they have little or no control over.

**Regressive behaviors** often are observed in children. Needing to be held, clinginess, inability to sleep in their bed, bedwetting, thumb-sucking and rocking are some reactions children exhibit.

**Repeated questioning** is also observed as the child tries to process the almost incomprehensible (i.e., events of 9/11) and difficult information.

### **Developmental stages in understanding death**

The ages noted below should not be rigidly adhered to as children vary in their development, but are useful guides.

**Prior to age 3:** Children cannot achieve complete mourning. They will see parents as sad but do not really comprehend the meaning of death.

**Ages 3-5:** Children interpret death as temporary, reversible and a separation, not a permanent condition. Magical thinking is a big part of this age and children make many incorrect conclusions about death. For example, if a person died in the hospital, the child may link going to the hospital with death.

**Ages 5-9:** Children start to comprehend the finality of death. However, children still see death as something that will happen to others, not us. Children this age also may see death as a person (i.e., the Grim Reaper).

**Ages 10-12:** Children have the cognitive ability and emotional security to understand death as a finality and the ceasing of bodily functions.

**Adolescence:** Teenagers are fully able to grasp the meaning of death. They may seek out friends and family for comfort. Others may withdraw to deal with their grief.

## **WHAT CAN WE DO AS PARENTS?**

- \* Be a good listener. Listening will help guide you to know what they are feeling and their understanding of the concept of death.
- Give the child information at their level of understanding. Do not go beyond the question asked and their ability to take in the information. This is especially necessary with younger children.
- \* Be available to talk, cry and share feelings. A hug and/or holding your child can do more than any words can.
- \* Let the child know he/she is not alone and that you and others will do all they can to help him/her and to keep him/her safe.
- Let teachers and other significant adults in the child's life be aware of the loss the child is dealing with.
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- Stay with routines as much as possible.
- \* Prior to a funeral, services, wakes, shiva, etc., someone should tell the children what will take place and what they are likely to see there (including how people will react). They will let you know what they are capable of handling re: attending these.
- \* Make sure you deal with your own grief. While it is important to be there for your children, it should not be at the expense of your own emotional needs. You will be more able to help your child if you work through your own grief.
- \* Keep in mind that grieving is hard and takes time. In addition, adults and children react in different ways and at different time lines.
- \* Ask for help when necessary. Grief counseling as a family or individually can be quite helpful.