

Grief and Children

Preschool To Age Nine

This age child usually sees death as temporary and reversible. Between ages of five and nine, children begin to see death more like adults but still believe it will never happen to them.

Age Nine To Eleven

Child begins to understand death can happen to them. Death is becoming more real. This age child may show keen interest in the cause of death, details of the funeral, and in the biological aspects of death.

Adolescents

The adolescent searches for the meaning of life, which includes death. "Why" questions will be asked, many of which have no concrete answers. Often, adolescents' emotional response to death will be very intense and issues of unresolved grief of divorce of parents, etc., will emerge.

The Healing Process

A major part of the healing process is allowing oneself to experience the intense emotions associated with the pain of grief. The emotions typically experienced are, anger, guilt, and depression.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has developed five stages to the healing process:

- Denial and Isolation
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Guidelines For Helping Someone Who Is Grieving

When we are required to respond to a death, we ask ourselves: What should I do? What should I say? A few suggestions are:

- The best action is to take some kind of action. Let the students know how you feel,

encourage them to express their feelings and provide support to those who are grieving. Do not restrict the amount of time for the conversations to be finished so that the student does not sense "urgency" in your conversation.

- Be a good listener and accept the words and feelings being expressed. Don't minimize the loss and avoid giving cliches and easy answers.
- Encourage the grieving person to care for themselves.
- Acknowledge and accept your own limitations. Sometimes you may wish to have the help of outside resources.

Allow the expressions of grief. Acknowledge and encourage students to express their feelings of loss, anger, sadness, etc.

For Kindergarten Age Students

"How to Talk to your Kindergartener about Death" by Mary VanClay

http://www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-talk-to-your-kindergartner-about-death_67095.bc?page=1

For Grade School Students

"How to Talk to your Grade Schooler about Death" by Mary VanClay

http://www.babycenter.com/0_how-to-talk-to-your-grade-schooler-about-death_67896.bc

Other Resources

"Talking to Children about Death"

<http://www.hospicenet.org/html/talking.html>

Specific Information For Elementary Teachers

People have different reactions to grief. One way for the teacher to encourage the students' expression of grief is to acknowledge your own feelings immediately following the announcement of the student's death. If you are uncomfortable discussing grief or handling this situation in your classroom today, please ask for assistance from the school counselor.

If the death was a sudden one following an accident or one following a long-term illness, it may be important to have the students discuss their fears and to talk a bit about funerals. This may be a time when students ask questions. Questions need to be

answered honestly but tactfully and simply. The major focus should be on assisting students in expressing their feelings and reactions. (Students will respond differently based upon their past experience with death, coping skills, and age.)

The response of a young child to the death of a significant person may vary depending upon the personal, family, and social factors. The grieving process does not always have discernible stages as observed in adolescents or adults. Such factors as the closeness of the relationship, the time of preparation for the death, and the family's response to the death may influence the nature, duration, and severity of the grief response. After the loss of a loved one, the child may be reluctant to trust other adults for fear they too will die or go away. This confounds the teacher's role in supporting the student.

The variety of responses to death and often hide the child's true feelings. The child may behave as if nothing is really wrong, hoping that they can convince themselves that death is a reversible process and the deceased will return. Often the signs are physical or behavioral in nature, including: crying, clinging, and thumb sucking. Other signs of bodily distress might include: chronic worrying, lack of energy, and loss of appetite. The child may also demonstrate hostile reactions or there may be a looking to others or substituting that is designed to satisfy some physical or emotional need. There may be an idealizing of the individual during the initial response. **Perhaps the most powerful response of young children to death is one of guilt. There may be concern that they have done something to cause the death or should have been more helpful while the person was alive.**

The teacher can be very helpful to the young child by giving him/her accurate information in simple and understandable words. The information shared should be guided by the child's questions and should avoid the use of phrases such as "going on a long trip" or "going to sleep". By supporting the child's expressions of feeling in a caring manner, the teacher prepares the child for later grief events. If possible, it is helpful to young children to use such experiences as the loss of a pet to begin to acquire the skills necessary to get through the death of a person to whom they are acquainted.