

How Children Express Grief

Age Grief Response

Preverbal

Feel abandoned if caregivers are sad, depressed or in a state of shock
Use body language to describe how they feel
May get very quiet and still (frozen - in shock)
May scream and get very active, seeming to be inconsolable
Disrupted eating and sleeping habits - may awaken frequently
May seem very alert and “on guard” for danger
Seek body contact with someone known and loved

2-4

Irritable or clingy
Disrupted eating or sleeping patterns
Regressive behaviors (behaviors from a younger age)
Very present-oriented
Mostly aware of changes in their care
May ask repeated questions
Develop magical stories about loved ones who have died (e.g. Grandpa is sitting on a cloud protecting us right now)

4-7

May act as if nothing has happened
May do or say things that seem inappropriate to adults
Express their feelings through behaviors, play and art rather than words
Often feel responsible for things that happened which causes feelings of guilt
May want to share about the tragedy or death during show-n-tell
Ask a lot of “How?” and “Why?” questions
May have eating changes or sleeping problems including nightmares

7-11

Have more specific questions & they desire more complete information
Often hide tears and feelings so they don't appear childish
May try to imitate behaviors or mannerisms of someone who died
Often have complaints about body aches or pains which then worry them
Still common to have regressive behaviors
Often have feelings of guilt
May act out, get withdrawn or become overly grown up
Don't want to be different in any way from their peers
Often use art, play, behaviors or other non-verbal ways to express grief

12 -18 Often want to know all available information related to the death
May withdraw from the family and spend most of their time with friends
Often express anxiety about death by being reckless with their own lives
Tend to express emotional pain through physical symptoms, depression & anger
Often feel the need to be strong for their family
May become bossy in an effort to feel in control
Girls may increase sexually active in an attempt to receive physical comfort
Boys often seek bodily contact by becoming aggressive
Often have dropping grades or other school troubles
Sometimes have extreme focus on school work, improving their grades
Physical changes heighten emotional turmoil
Sleeping problems or eating disorders
Do most anything to avoid looking stupid or different in front of peers