

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S GRIEF

A child's emotional and physical reaction to grief looks similar to how adults respond, such as crying, lack of appetite, sleep disturbances, anger, sorrow, etc. However, a child's understanding of death and dying may not be fully developed depending on how old they are. Below is a guideline of how children may perceive death at different ages.

Ages 5 and under

- They will notice that there is a change in their environment
- They will see death as temporary and reversible
- They will often repeat their story or ask the same questions

Ages 6-8

- This age groups begins to understand the permanence of death
- They may feel like they were somehow responsible for the death, "*I told mommy I was mad at her, did that kill her?*"
- They may begin to think they are losing control of things around them

Ages 9-12

- Their understanding of death becomes more concrete
- Experiencing a death may interfere with their self-identity and self-esteem
- Children may become more anxious about death as they realize bad things can happen to children too

Teenagers

- It is common for teens to seek support and comfort from their peers
- Teens are most likely to express anger over any other age group
- Just because the teenager isn't outwardly discussing or expressing their grief, doesn't mean it doesn't exist

Ways to support a grieving child

- Listen and provide a safe space for the child to express all emotions
- Be honest and use age-appropriate language when answering questions or giving information. It's okay to say, "I don't know" if you do not have answers to their questions.
- Avoid using euphemisms such as *passed away* or *went to sleep*; instead, use *dead* and *died*.
- Provide children with choices and continue with routine as much as possible
- Talk about the person who died and continue using their name
- Provide lots of opportunity for play as this helps children process thoughts and emotions
- Be a model for the child
- Have patience as there could be regression such as bed wetting, sleep disturbances, etc.
- Every child grieves in their own way

If you have any questions, please reach out to us at questions@cehhospice.org or by calling 902-893-3265.