



What Grief Looks Like in Children

Typical signs of grief in children:

- Children move in and out of grief. They grieve in “spurts.” They may appear sad and tearful, followed by periods of play. This is normal.
- Children often ask the same questions over and over about the death. They have not forgotten, but they need to hear it again to try to understand something which is so unreal to them.
- Children often feel unsafe and express fears. Being afraid of the dark, fears of sleeping alone, worrying about other “bad things” happening are all normal. Adults need to provide extra reassurance instead of dismissing these fears.
- Young children may fantasize about the return of the person or talk about when they return as a part of their inability to understand “gone forever.” Adults should patiently explain that the person is dead, which means they will not come back again.
- Because they lack the vocabulary to explain their feelings, children often express their grief through the following behaviors:
 - Anger
 - Acting out or ignoring rules.
 - Feeling sick-tummy aches, headaches
 - Not sleeping well
 - Lack of confidence
 - Death play. Play is the work of children, so they may re-enact funeral rituals or what they have heard about the death.
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Changes in academic performance—some become perfectionists; others may fail

Signs of concern that warrant an assessment or evaluation for counseling:

- Chronic headache, tummy ache, or other physical symptoms –going on for months.
- Continued refusal to accept the reality of the death.
- On-going problems with eating or sleeping.
- Threats or preoccupation with self-harm. It is not unusual for children to say, “I wish I could die so I can see my mom/dad again.” This is rarely a threat of harm, but just their means of expressing how much they miss the person.
- Isolation, deliberate avoidance of or refusal to be with other children their age.
- Continued loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed.
- Development of obsessive tendencies that reveal anxiety and an inability to engage in normal childhood activities.

No one should
grieve alone!