

COLORS OF GRIEF:

UNDERSTANDING A CHILD'S JOURNEY THROUGH LOSS

Children's tolerance for grief is limited, so they will bounce in and out of grieving over some time. It is okay if they shift out of grief and have fun, and then a few days/weeks later are back in grief. It does not mean they are not hurting over the loss or did not care about that person, they are just managing grief in a way that suits their abilities. The younger the child is, the less they can tolerate at one time. Allow them to set the pace of their grieving. It is also not uncommon for the grief of significant people to pop back up as children hit different developmental stages, such as a transition to middle or high school. It is healthy to revisit the sense of loss and allow them to re-organize their understanding given their increased brain functioning. If at any point it seems your child is stuck in the grieving process, such as a prolonged inability to engage in school, home, and/or friends, please reach out for additional care.



INFANTS AND TODDLERS

0-2 YEARS

CHARACTERISTICS

- Move from being totally dependent on caregiver for every aspect of care to being able to walk and speak simple words.
- Learn quickly to recognize their caregivers. Learn to know their face, their voice, their smell, and even the feel of their body as they are cared for.
- Need attention, affection, and routine as well as physical needs met.
- Do not yet understand time or the idea that when something is out of sight, it still exists.

RESPONSE TO LOSS | GRIEF REACTIONS

- Experience grief or the loss of someone they love as an absence or void.
- Sense the emotions of those around them and respond.
- They may react to grief and loss by becoming more fussy and clingy.
- May have trouble sleeping or have a decrease in appetite.

CARE GIVER|PARENT HELPS

- Identify hidden regulators. Regulators are previous activities, patterns or important objects that were in their world in the recent past and use them again. For example, old bedtimes, naptimes, same bottles or foods/feeding bowls, beds, scents, etc.
- Maintain a schedule.
- Play simple games to stimulate the senses or if over-stimulated, decrease activity.
- Provide pictures of prior caregivers, other children or the child's home. They help to fill in memories.

PRESCHOOLERS

3-5 YEARS

CHARACTERISTICS

- Vocabulary increases, learn to speak in sentences, can draw simple shapes.
- Learn to do simple self-care. They can dress, wash their hands and feed themselves if food is prepared for them.
- Have much stronger bonds with caregivers, dependent on caregiver for emotional support, encouragement and direction.
- Depend on caregivers to provide shelter, food, protection, and safety.
- Have a limited understanding of concepts of time like morning, afternoon, evening. Do not really understand how long a month or year is.

RESPONSE TO LOSS | GRIEF REACTIONS

- Not sure of the difference between dead and alive.
- Do not understand that death is permanent. May know that daddy died one minute and ask when he will be home, the next.
- Imaginative, love to role play and will express feelings and experiences during play, This is a good age to begin simple, creative activities to engage in the loss process.

CARE GIVER|PARENT HELPS

- Identify hidden regulators. Regulators are previous activities, patterns or important objects that were in their world in the recent past and use them again. For example, rituals and routines including bedtime & comfort food.
- Create a memory box including objects belonging to the lost person or reminders of that person along with some of their own favorite things.
- Keep some items of the lost person to discuss with her/him when they are older.
- Acknowledge feelings; do not dismiss them even if they seem illogical. Avoid being overly permissive or punitive.
- Answer questions in one sentence responses and wait to see how they respond. Take the child's lead in continuing.

PRIMARY SCHOOL

6-9 YEARS

CHARACTERISTICS

- Vocabulary continues to grow, They are able to express more complicated ideas and to tell stories about an event.
- Learn to express ideas in writing. Can be very imaginative.
- They are able to assist with simple chores in the home.
- Have strong bonds and feelings about caregivers.
- They are dependent on caregivers for emotional support, guidance, and to provide for physical needs but also able to look for support from other adults and peers.
- Friendships begin to become more important.
- Have a better understanding of time than a younger child. Relate longer periods of time to events, such as birthdays and holidays.
- Can express feelings but may not always be aware or understand what they are feeling or why.
- Continue to need routine and structure.

RESPONSE TO LOSS | GRIEF REACTIONS

- Begin to understand that death is permanent and lasting.
- Don't always understand that death will happen to all people, including themselves someday.
- They may imagine death as an impersonal force that is out to get them.
- They might think they can control or avoid death by trickery or good behavior.
- They might want to have elaborate "funerals" for a dead animal or bug,
- May think they caused or contributed to the death of the person.

CARE GIVER|PARENT HELPS

- Allow a child to keep something belonging to the deceased loved one.
- Involve the child in memorializing activity such as looking at photos.
- Read books together about loss and separation to help the child identify and recognize what they are feeling.
- Engage in a dialog about the child's role in the death. If they believe they caused it, ask "How do you think you caused it?" and gently challenge or probe.
- Anger can be expressed in unacceptable ways. Help the child find a physical outlet or help them take a time out in a calm place. Deep, slow breathing or taking a walk can help.
- Place appropriate behavior boundaries. Limit setting can start with the phrase "The rule is ..." Validate feelings but not unacceptable behavior. Follow through on consequences.



PREADOLESCENTS

10-12 YEARS

CHARACTERISTICS

- They are able to express more complicated stories and thoughts on paper and verbally.
- Has a good grasp of time. Understand longer periods of time in terms of weeks, months, years. Understand ideas such as forever and never.
- They can help out around the house with most jobs but still require guidance and some supervision.
- Some children this age may begin to experience hormonal changes as puberty is approaching.
- Peer interaction is very important but also seeks and needs adult approval.
- Notice the opposite sex as more than just a playmate.
- Look up to “heroes” and want to be like them.
- Know what different feelings mean. Can use words to express their feelings but more likely to express feelings with actions.
- Have a strong sense of right and wrong.
- Need structure and consistent discipline.

RESPONSE TO LOSS | GRIEF REACTIONS

- Understand death as permanent and universal—that all people will eventually die.
- Think about God and the afterlife. Interested in what happens after a person dies.

CARE GIVER|PARENT HELPS

- Increase structure in the environment. May need to go back to an earlier stage.
- Limit and/or prioritize homework. Concentration is impaired just as an adult's.
- Identify clear, predictable and consistent roles and responsibilities for school and home.
- Help or encourage them to keep a journal, create a collage, write a poem or build a scrapbook of memories.
- Place appropriate behavior boundaries. Limit setting can start with the phrase “The rule is ... “ Validate feelings but not unacceptable behavior. Follow through on consequences. They need to understand someone is in control.

ADOLESCENTS|TEENS

13-19+ YEARS

CHARACTERISTICS

- Vocabulary progresses to that of an adult.
- Understand more complicated ideas and concepts as an adult but lack life experience.
- Older teens may be able to get a job.
- Hormonal mood swings are common.
- Moving from childhood to an adult is a struggle.
 - Want to prove their independence .
 - Don't want to take full responsibility for their lives.
- Realize that adults are less (much less) than perfect. Question adult's ideas and ways.
- They are very interested in the opposite sex.
- Continue to need rules and consequences but also need to have the freedom to make more and more choices as they show responsibility.
- They are concerned about personal appearance and abilities. It is important how others view them. Unsure how they measure up compared to others.
- Have hopes and dreams for the future.

RESPONSE TO LOSS | GRIEF REACTIONS

- Many teenagers are afraid of death and to overcome their fear may challenge death by doing crazy stunts, or dangerous behaviors...trying to prove to themselves that they can avoid death.
- Clearly understand that death is permanent and universal.
- They are interested in exploring more abstract ideas about God, heaven and hell.
- May question taught beliefs.

CARE GIVER|PARENT HELPS

- This age group typically doesn't share what they are going through or how they are feeling. Peers often quickly tire of the grief process and want them to move on which increases the sense of isolation. Monitor and engage in family activities/conversation.
- Connect them for conversation with others who have experienced a loss and are further along in healthy processing and healing.
- Help or encourage them to keep a journal, create a collage, write a poem or build a scrapbook of memories.
- Monitor for high risk behavior which indicates decreased judgment, attention and concentration. Set appropriate limits and follow through on consequences.
- Increased stress can compromise the immune system. It is important to get enough sleep as well. This age often has difficulty getting to sleep at night. For a time, you may need to adjust morning schedules.
- Provide no electronics/video game spaces/times. Take a walk instead, ride a bike, get outside.