

Preparing the Children: Infants and Toddlers

Adults sometimes feel that children are too fragile to face the reality of death, or too young to understand. Children experience the same emotions adults do; most are emotionally strong enough and want to know about death. The truth helps them understand what is real and what is not. It is important to remember that grieving is natural. Support for their unique grief processes helps children heal and learn to live with a painful loss. With help, a child may find grief a growing process. It is important to make sure that the help offered is age appropriate.

Age affects how children understand death - Infants and Toddlers up to age 3

- May not understand death, but may react to the emotions of adults around them
- May sense a change in his/her schedule
- May show distress if someone who has taken care of him/her is suddenly gone, or unable to care for him/her any longer

Signs and symptoms of Grieving/Mourning

- May cry more than usual
- May have temper tantrums
- May be clingy

What to do to help and infant or toddler feel secure

- Try to maintain his/her usual routines
- Stay physically close to help the child feel safe. The child may need lots of hugs; allow him/her to sit on your lap
- Reassure him/her that he/she will be cared for and is loved
- Certain books may be read to the child and may be a good tool to help the child. Children may identify with a character in a book, learning they have similar feelings, which helps the healing process. Ask the nurse about books

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Extreme behavior changes
- Withdrawal
- Frequent Nightmares

Should children visit the dying?

- Depends on the situation. If the child is old enough to understand what is happening and the dying person has played an important role in his or her life, then it may be good for both the child and the dying person
- The child needs to be prepared for what he/she will see and hear. A picture and description of equipment in the room may help
- May be useful to children, to help diminish the mystery of death
- May help the child develop more realistic ways of coping
- A child should never be forced to visit a dying person or go to a funeral, not should he/she be made to feel guilty for not wanting to be involved

Should children attend funerals?

Yes, if a child wants to go and is old enough to understand the event. Rituals can be an important part of the grieving process. Prepare the child for the event by explaining what they will see and hear, especially if there will be a viewing. Give the child a choice, but try to understand the child's reasons so you can address any fears or misconceptions and answer questions.

The grieving process is normal and the process helps both adults and children heal from their pain. If you have questions or concerns, please contact the hospice or palliative care team, a bereavement group, religious advisor, or a mental health professional. Your child and you may need support during a time of grief. Please don't hesitate to ask for help.