

Preparing the Children: Preschool ages 3-5

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 – Preschool children ages 3-5 years

- May have some understanding about death, but may think it is reversible like he/she sees on cartoons
- May ask when a loved one will return, or may need the facts repeated
- May believe that his/her thoughts or feelings have power over others and may believe he/she caused a loved one's illness or death
- Do not understand that every living thing will die and may question if other people or pets die

How to explain

- The person talking to the child should be someone the child knows and trusts and it should be done in a quiet, private place
- Tell the truth; explain what dead means. Keep it simple by saying the person's "body stopped working" and the doctors could not fix it. Tell the child he/she will never see that person again except in his/her memory or pictures
- State the facts that the person "died/is dying" not that he/she "went/going away," "Passed/ing to the other side," or "went/going to sleep." The child may expect the person to return or wake up
- Tell the child it is okay to cry or feel angry or sad. Acknowledge that it is a scary, confusing time. Allow him/her to see adults crying and express their emotions. Allow the child to ask questions

What can be done?

- Reassure the child that it was not his/her fault, that he/she will be cared for and is loved
- It may take some time for a child to react. Be present and attentive
- Allow the child to play and have fun
- Certain books may be a good tool to help the child become aware of his/her feelings and talk about them. Children may identify with a character in a book, learning they have similar feelings, which helps the healing process. Ask the nurse about books

Signs and symptoms of Grieving/Mourning

- Anxiety. The child may be clingy or demanding. He/she may lose his/her sense of security, or fear the loss of another loved one

- Sleep difficulty. This is common, especially if “sleep” was used to describe death. He/she may have nightmares
- Behavior changes “acting out.” The child may be angry at death, God, or other adults or himself/herself. He/she may feel responsible
- Withdrawal. The child may not want to talk about the dying loved one, hide in his/her room or behind furniture
- School problems. The child may have difficulty concentrating
- Physical complaints. The child may experience, such as a headache, stomach ache or similar symptoms as the person who is ill or died

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Any kind of extreme behavior

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.