

Preparing the Children: School Aged 6-9 Years

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 – School aged children 6-9 years

- Are beginning to understand that death is final
- May need more details about death, or how a loved one died. He/she may be curious about the physical details

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 child will never see that person again except in his/her memories or pictures
- State the facts. State that a person "died/is dying," not that he/she "went/going away," "Passed/ing to the other side," or "went/are going to sleep." The child may then expect the person to return or wake up. Also, if the person died of illness, explain that he/se was very, very sick so the child will not be scared when he/she gets a minor illness
- Address emotions. 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 expressing his/her 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
- Rituals are important at this stage and help the situation seem more real. Allow the child to participate in a funeral or memorial, if he/she desires
- 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 the 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. The child may have nightmares

- Behavior changes, such as “acting out.” The child may be angry at death, God, other adults or himself/herself. He/she may feel responsible
- Withdrawal or attempts to hide feelings. The child may not want to talk about the dying loved one, hide in his/her room
- School problems. He/she may have difficulty concentrating
- School complaints. He/she may experience headaches, stomach aches or similar symptoms as the person who is ill or died
- Denial that the death happened. Fear that other loved ones will die

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team?

- Any kind of extreme behavior

Should children visit the dying?

- Depends on the situation. It may be useful to the child to help diminish the mystery of death. If the child is old enough to understand what is happening and the dying person has played an important role in his/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 the equipment in the room may help
- It may help the child develop more realistic ways of coping
- A child should never be forced to visit a dying patient, go to a funeral or funeral home, nor 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 professional counselor.