

HOW DO PRIMARY STUDENTS GRIEVE?

Primary school children are still learning to understand death and can have some confused thoughts about it. They may think death is temporary, or that the person who has died may still feel things, such as coldness, hunger, or loneliness etc. They may ask where the person is now and have blunt questions to ask about what happened to them and to their body. Explaining death to them is very important.

Common reactions....

- looking for the person who has died
- having dreams about, or sensing the presence of, the person who has died
- blaming themselves for the death
- being easily distracted, forgetful
- being anxious; having increased fears, such as of the dark, of others' safety
- clinginess – wanting to be near you or others more
- withdrawing, being quiet, showing a lack of response
- being fretful, distressed, not wanting to go to school
- feeling embarrassment; feeling different from others; may conceal their loss
- physical complaints, such as tummy aches, headaches, aching
- being irritable, having more tantrums, being defiant, or developing antisocial or aggressive behaviour
- changes in eating or sleeping habits
- toileting problems, bed wetting, soiling

How to help them.....

1. frequently reassure them they are safe, and who is looking after them.
2. keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible.
3. tell them you know they are sad – start to use words that describe feelings.
4. keep separated from them as little as possible.
5. allow questions and provide honest answers.
6. comfort them with hugs, cuddles, holding their hand, and by encouraging them.
7. speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them.
8. explain death as part of life, so they come to understand it bit by bit. Using some examples in nature may be helpful, such as watching plants grow, bloom and die or seasons change.
9. let them help in planning the funeral or something to remember the loss.
10. provide comfort items, such as a cuddly toy, special blanket etc.
11. encourage play – children often can use play to help them process what has happened, for example, sand play, puppets, dolls, writing, drawing, painting and various physical activities.

How do older children (10-12 years) grieve?

Common reactions....

All the above relate to this age group, but it is important to be aware that by this age children know death is final. They are also more aware of how adults and others around them are reacting to death. This group may also:

- be especially anxious about the safety of family and friends, and themselves
- try very hard to please adults and not worry them, and so not let themselves grieve
- feel stronger emotional reactions, such as anger, guilt, sense of rejection
- want to take on more adult responsibilities, trying very hard to please
- feel embarrassment; feel different from peers; may conceal their loss
- become more focused on what has happened and ask questions, think about it a lot, have dreams about it, and perhaps want to talk about it often to others

How to help them.....

They need all the help in the previous section plus:

1. time to talk with you and other trusted adults when they need to.
2. regular reassurance – spoken, and with encouraging physical touch (such as hugs, pat on the back etc).
3. honesty about events, and feelings.
4. to know you understand their grief.
5. regular encouragement.
6. avoid expectations of adult behaviour – allow them to be the age and stage they are.