

Developmental Responses to Grief and Loss

*Grief is a very personal process. At all ages, different people will respond in different ways. The information provided below is a resource of what you **may** see at different age levels.*

Age	Concept of Death	Grief issues	How to Help
3-6 Years	May have a concept of death, depending on the experience; death may be caused by thoughts or feelings (magical thinking); may be interested in physical and biological aspects of death and the dead body; may think death is like sleep; senses caregiver's emotional distress	Could include: fear and difficulty understanding feelings; irritability, change in sleep, eating and play patterns; regression; concern with who will be caregiver; show feelings, thoughts through play because may not have vocabulary to explain self; close attachment to remaining caregiver and fear separation; repeated questions; curiosity; physical reactions and acting out behaviors	Answer questions, listen, maintain a schedule; use appropriate vocabulary for the age; provide play opportunities; model/encourage appropriate expression of feelings and memory sharing; allow grieving student to be classroom helper
7-12 Years	Death is sometimes thought of as ghosts; beginning to understand the finality of death; may be interested in physical and biological reactions aspects of death; may feel that he or she caused the death	Could include: irritability, change in sleep, eating and play patterns, regression, concern with who will be the caregiver; the feeling of stigma at school or around peers; close attachment to remaining caregiver and fear separation; concern about future of self and others; curiosity; physical reactions and acting out behaviors	Answer questions, listen, maintain a schedule; use appropriate vocabulary for age; be honest and factual; provide play opportunities; model/encourage appropriate expression of feelings and memory sharing; acknowledge death, allow grieving student to be classroom helper be flexible with school work and due dates (shorten assignments or give longer to work if possible)
Teen Years	Death is final, an end to physical life; realization of own mortality and think s about the meaning of life; may be interested in physical and biological aspects of death; may feel he or she caused the death; understands future and what loss will mean	Could include: irritability, change in sleep, eating and social behaviors; concern with who will be caregiver; feelings of stigma at school or around peers; close attached to remaining caregiver/family; concern about the future or self or others or lack of concern about future; taking on role of deceased; struggle with needing support and not wanting it; feeling of being smothered or overprotected by family members; sense of responsibility for other family members and their grief process; confusion with religious beliefs; difficulty concentrating	Answer questions, listen, maintain a schedule; be available when teen wants to talk; be honest and factual; reduce expectations; model/encourage appropriate expression or feelings and memory sharing; journaling, acknowledge death, be flexible with school work and due dates (shorten assignments or give longer to work if possible)