

Mini-Articles: Other Reactions

Grieving Children's Reactions Sometimes Confuse Adults

Children's reactions to the death of a loved one vary greatly. Adults are sometimes confused if a grieving child doesn't behave as expected. Sometimes children appear happy and play as usual. Sometimes they say angry or unkind things about the person who died.

It's important to understand that after the death of someone close, children *will* be experiencing deep and powerful emotions, even if this is not at first clear from the things they say and do.

For example, children may appear calm and unemotional on the surface because they are working to keep their powerful feelings hidden from others. They may express anger and resentment because the loss leaves them feeling anxious and out of control. They may act out and take risks in an effort to master new feelings of personal vulnerability. They may regress and act like a younger child in an effort to gain attention and be comforted.

Education professionals can take steps to let children know they care, want to listen and are willing to help. Here are some good ways to start:

1. *Ask grieving children what they are feeling.* Check in regularly and invite them to talk about what's going on in their lives.
2. *Observe and listen.* Rather than directly interpreting children's behaviors, comments or creative work, ask them to describe what they mean or what they have created and what it means to them.
3. *Normalize the emotional experiences of grief.* It can be helpful for children to understand that it's common to feel strong emotions after a death. Let them know that over time, these feelings usually become less powerful, and that talking about them often helps in this process.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

“His mom died and he didn’t even look sad” —Understanding Children’s Reactions to Death

Reactions to death vary greatly in children. Some students appear to have little or no reaction at all after the death of someone important in their lives.

This does not mean they are not greatly affected by the death, however. Reese, an elementary student, put it this way:

“Emotions really affect me a lot, so I just don’t talk about it a lot. I just keep it in my body sometimes. It’s hard. I do different ways to just keep it in and not out.”

This eloquently describes the experience of many grieving children. They make an extraordinary effort to keep their emotions hidden from others.

These children may not trust themselves to control their feelings—they would be embarrassed if they began to cry at school. They may be uncomfortable about appearing emotional or needy in front of peers. They may have sensed discomfort from family, teachers and classmates when they *did* express strong feelings, and be hiding their feelings to protect others.

Sometimes children don’t understand themselves why they are keeping their emotions hidden.

Conversations, check-ins and invitations to ask questions or discuss feelings can be helpful for any student experiencing grief, regardless of how he or she appears to be coping.

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Writing, Art and Play: Non-Verbal Ways to Support Grieving Children

Many children and teens express their feelings in ways other than talking. Very young children often work through their feelings during play. Older children may use creative activities such as writing, music and art to express their thoughts and feelings.

It's helpful to offer grieving children opportunities to participate in such activities. These creative endeavors can provide important clues to their thoughts and feelings. However, it's important not to jump to conclusions about what these activities mean.

For example, sometimes a child draws only happy pictures after a traumatic loss. Adults might think, "This child has adjusted well, or has not been deeply affected by these events." In fact, it's more likely such children are giving a sign they are not yet ready to process or express their thoughts and feelings about the death.

This is why it's a good idea to ask children to describe what their work is about or what story they are telling. This will often invite more open and honest conversation, especially if you are able to offer this kind of check-in repeatedly over time.

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](#), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.