

# Solutions

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NEWSLETTER

Issue 23

## Child and Adolescent Grief

When a family member dies, children and adolescents react differently from adults. But helping a grieving child is not that different from helping a grieving adult. Your support can help the child deal with a loved one's terminal illness and death in a healthy way.

### Suggestions to help children manage bereavement

- 1. Be honest.** Provide children with factual information appropriate to their age.
- 2. Remember young children are concrete thinkers.** Adults talk in euphemisms when speaking about death. Adults must ensure euphemisms don't scare or confuse children. For instance, if an adult says, "We lost Grandma today," a child may want to know why people aren't looking for her. Similarly, an explanation such as, "Dad is sleeping peacefully now" may create a fear of sleeping in the child. It is most clear and helpful to the child if you use and explain the words "death" and "dying."
- 3. Encourage children to express their feelings.** Talk with them about how they feel about their loss. Sit with the child as he or she plays with dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, toy cars, and doll houses. Look for aggression in play and explore where the anger is focused.
- 4. Let the child know how you feel.** Acknowledging your feelings lets children know it is okay to experience and address their own feelings.
- 5. Offer the children pictures or possessions of the deceased.** It can help the grieving process to recollect memories of the deceased.
- 6. Allow the child to attend the funeral.** Children usually find it helpful to be included in the family's rituals of mourning. If the child chooses to attend the funeral ensure he or she knows what to expect. However, a child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go. Find some other way for the child to say goodbye to the dead person—such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer, making a scrapbook, reviewing photographs, telling a story or visiting the grave.
- 7. Reassure the child**
  - that the death was not their fault
  - that they are loved and wanted
  - that life will go on and not always be sad
  - that feeling angry and upset are a part of grieving
  - that their surviving family members are healthy and are not likely to die until they are much older.

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# Child and Adolescent Grief

(Continued)

Children who are having serious problems with grief may show one or more of these signs:

- an extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events
- inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone
- acting much younger for an extended period
- excessively imitating the dead person
- repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
- withdrawal from friends, or
- sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school

**Teenagers may also express grief in the following ways:**

## **Shock/Disbelief**

This numbness or form of denial is an important coping mechanism and should be respected. In months to come, the numbness will fade and they will need you more than ever.

## **Thoughts of Suicide**

A teenager may think of suicide as a way of escaping pain or joining their loved one. Be non-judgmental. Wanting to escape the pain is a normal response. If the teenager is describing to you a method of how he or she plans to take their life, this is a "red flag". Seek professional help immediately.

## **Sexual Activity**

A teen may become sexually active during the grief process. If the teen has lost a family member, other family members may be unavailable for them emotionally, as they too are in pain. The need to be close to someone, both physically and emotionally, can be very strong at this time, and sexual activity can also serve as a distraction from his or her pain.

## **Drugs/Alcohol**

It is a natural response to want to numb the pain of grief—when someone is drunk or high they do not have to feel. Bereaved teens are at high risk for involving themselves in self-destructive behavior. While these drugs may temporarily numb the pain, they prolong and complicate the grieving process. It is important to be open with the teenager about the dangers of drugs and alcohol without pointing a judgmental finger.

## **Anger**

It is important that teens be given healthy options in expressing their anger. Some suggestions might include screaming into a pillow or pounding a mattress. These expressions of anger release the physical energy that words alone cannot but do not hurt the teenager or those around him or her.

**For help for a grieving child or adolescent contact:**

- Your FSEAP Professional
- A school counselor or a clergy member
- A support group for bereaved families (often listed in the community support section of your local paper)

*Family Services* offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of personal and work-related issues. For more information on your EAP, call:

**1-800-668-9920**