

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

Joan E. LeFebvre
Area Family Living Agent
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Vilas, Forest, Florence Counties

Children and Grief

Just as death is part of life, grief is an experience everyone will undergo at some time. Children who experience the hurt and pain of grief need comfort, support, and guidance -- even when parents and others are struggling with their own feelings of loss and grief.

Children Grieve, But Differently From Adults

When a family member dies, children react differently from adults. Some differences include:

Preschool children usually see death as temporary and reversible -- a belief reinforced by cartoon characters who “die” and “come to life” again. Children between five and nine begin to think more like adults about death, yet they still believe it will never happen to them or anyone they know.

Children don’t grieve consistently. They can and do interrupt their sorrow to watch television or play with friends. Bewildered adults might wonder if the youngster really understands and appreciates what has happened.

In response to grief, some children may act younger than they are. The child may temporarily become more infantile, demanding food, attention and cuddling, and talking “baby talk.”

Fears may intensify. A child may refuse to go to the basement, go out in the dark, be left alone in the house, be concerned when you leave the house, or become worried about the health of a remaining parent or sibling.

Children may express pain by acting out and misbehaving. They may get into fights with other children, become sullen and withdrawn, become negative in their behavior, and show anger towards other children and adults. They may give you a hard time around the house, stop doing chores or become oppositional.

If the person who has died is important to the stability of the child’s world, the child may feel anger towards the person who died or towards the surviving family members. The anger may be revealed in boisterous play, nightmares, irritability, or a variety of other behaviors. This is a natural reaction.

Helping A Child Cope With Grief

Let the child participate in the rituals of death, but don’t force the issue. A child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be forced to go; however, some service or observance is recommended, such as lighting a candle, saying a prayer or visiting a grave site. The purpose of funeral rituals is to help people cope and allow family and friends to provide support and strength. Explain to your child that it can help to be with other people during difficult times.

In the beginning, your grief may be overwhelming and make it difficult to reach out to your child. Seek out family members, adult friends, and professionals who can “stand in” until you feel able to cope. As you heal, make opportunities to spend time with your child to discuss feelings and questions. Do simple things together -- the

activity is less important than being together. As you feel comfortable, begin to mention the deceased in conversation. This allows your child an opportunity to share memories, thoughts, and feelings. Some children may become upset by your tears. Be sensitive to your child's needs and aware of your ability to provide comfort.

Offer your child objects "to remember by." But if your child doesn't want it, don't be upset. The child may become more open to it at a later time.

If your child misbehaves or acts out, be understanding and if possible explain to them the reasons behind their behavior and feelings. Allow children to express their sorrow, anger, pain -- but encourage them to express their feelings in appropriate ways.

Play of young children may include reenacting the funeral, being sick, or even dying. This is a way of confronting feelings and "normalizing" the situation, making it less scary.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. Make it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly or freely.

Questions Children Ask

Many questions children ask seem to be concerned with their own needs rather than their sorrow. This is normal. It is a tumultuous time filled with uncertainty and can be confusing to young children. Answer questions honestly and offer reassurance.

Did I cause this death? Younger children often believe they are the cause of what happens around them. Consequently, a young child may believe a parent, grandparent, brother or sister died because he or she had once "wished" the person dead or because of something they did. The child feels

guilty because the wish "came true." Explain to your child that thoughts, feelings, and angry words cannot cause someone to die. Sickness and accidents cause death.

When will...come back? Because young children do not have the same concept of death as adults or even older children, the idea of "finality" is hard to grasp. Gently remind them that when people die they don't come home again. You may want to include information consistent with your religious beliefs.

Will this happen to me? Children fear that they may die and may need reassurance.

How will life be different? This can be a time of great uncertainty for your child because change is threatening and upsetting. Familiar places and routines can be comforting. Prepare a child for unavoidable changes and explain that some changes are necessary, but reinforce what will remain the same.

Some danger signals to watch for:

- ▶ 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.

These warning signs indicate that professional help may be needed. A child psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, or therapist can help the child accept the death and assist the survivors in helping the child through the mourning process.

Sources:

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Online (<http://www.aacap.org>). May 31, 1996.
"Children and Grief: A Guide for Parents." North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center, Roslyn, New York. 1996.

Author: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
Reviewer: Steve Small, Extension Specialist, Family Life, UW-Madison
Layout: Penny Otte, Program Assistant I, Family Living Area Office, Vilas County

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: JOAN E. LEFEBVRE, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, P O Box 369, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
March, 1998