



Responding to the Grieving Child - Ages 3-6

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- Death is *separation* to a child of this age. They understand that the person is gone, but may not understand that this is a *permanent* separation.
- It is extremely important to use direct and up-front vocabulary when referring to death. Say "*Grandma died*", NOT "*Grandma went bye-bye*", "*Grandma is sleeping*", or "*We lost grandma.*" Statements like these can be scary and confusing to young children.
- Use simple, concrete language. You could explain that when someone dies, what's left is just their body --the part of the person that made them special is no longer there. They cannot see, hear, think, talk, breathe, or FEEL anything anymore.
- *Remember: a child is first and foremost a child.* We should not expect a child to behave and react as we do upon learning of a death. If she immediately wants to go play after being told that someone special has died, *that's okay.* It does not necessarily mean she does not understand or is not affected. Children have the wonderful and unique ability to randomly move into and away from their grief.
- The child may ask questions over and over again - try to answer them over and over again. Each time a question is answered, the child's understanding will grow.
- Children of this age need love and attention. This helps to reassure them that they will be taken care of and not forgotten; that they still are part of a loving family even though someone has died.
- Try to stick to the familiar routine. This will help to strengthen the child's sense of security and familiarity, which is often weakened when someone loved dies.
- A preschooler who has experienced the death of a close family member may show signs of physical and/or emotional regression:
 - Previously potty old blanket or stuffed animal that she used to carry around everywhere
 - Uncharacteristic trained -- now unable to consistently control his bladder or bowels
 - May now need that thumb-sucking
 - "Clingy" behavior - especially if it was a parent who died

These are all common expressions of the grieving 3-6 year old. By tending to the child's "baby-like" needs, you will be letting him know that he will be taken care of and that he is loved unconditionally.

- Children of this age learn by imitation. They need to see the adults in their lives expressing their grief in healthy ways. This gives them permission to grieve, too. If you hide your feelings, the child will most likely do the same.
- Children, no matter how young, should have the opportunity to participate in the family grief, which includes visitation and/or funeral. Help them to know what to expect before they go. Also, explain the purpose of the funeral ritual: a time to be happy about our love for the person who has died, a time to be sad that he/she has died, a time to say goodbye.

