

# Helping Children Cope with Loss



## Introduction

Illness and death affect all members of the family – young and old. Children also experience grief and need opportunities to mourn. Keep in mind that children are not miniature adults. Because of the developmental differences between children and adults, children show their grief differently. Understanding these differences will help you support the child who is grieving.

## Age 0 to 2

Children have no real understanding of a death, but they will have a sense of the parent's loss. They can also sense the emotional changes in the home. Typically, a child this age will show signs of irritability, changes in eating, crying or bowel and bladder habits.

## Ages 3 to 5

Children begin to have a limited concept of death. They still don't see death as being permanent and will often ask the same questions repeatedly to begin to make sense of the loss. It is important for the adults in the child's life to continue to "tell" the story as often as needed. Preschool age children are typically capable of showing sadness for only short periods of time. It is also not unusual to see a return to earlier behaviors such as thumb sucking or clinginess. Young children also may become more fearful and have a great need for security. It is particularly important to keep their same routine.

## Ages 6 to 10

Older children can better understand the finality of death and have a great need for truthful information, but they are often unprepared for the length of the grief process. Children this age may also begin to understand other possible consequences of death, such as loss of a home or other financial problems. When coping with the loss of a significant person, these children may have angry outbursts and act out in socially inappropriate ways. It is also not unusual to see children who perform well in school have school related problems.

## Preadolescence and Adolescents

Teens understand very well the finality of death and the impact of the death on the family. Developmentally, these children are beginning to separate emotionally from their family and do not always talk about their feelings with adults. They may show signs of depression or anger. They may also return to earlier stages of behavior or become involved in dangerous behaviors such as substance abuse. With this age group, in particular, it is important to seek out counseling assistance, if warranted.

