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When a Death Occurs in a Child's Life

COMMON REACTIONS THAT CHILDREN MAY HAVE

What we *can* be certain about is that children's reactions to a death relate to their thoughts and feelings. Sometimes these reactions make sense to teachers, parents, and other adults. At other times, they can be confusing. However, when adults understand what children are thinking and feeling, things tend to become much clearer.

The following are some common reactions children may have to death:

Children May Become Upset by Discussions About Their Loved One

As previously mentioned, it is not the conversation causing distress, but the very painful loss felt from the death of a loved one. Talking with children provides a chance for them to show their feelings. When this is understood, it is easier to help them cope with the experience.

Children May Be Reluctant to Talk About a Recent Death

Often children are uncomfortable talking about a death because they see that the adults around them are uncomfortable talking about it. Children may withhold their own comments or questions to avoid upsetting family members, family friends, or teachers. They may believe it is wrong to talk about such things. It is common for older children and teens to turn to peers to discuss a death. They sometimes tell adults close to them that they do not want or need to talk about it.

Children May Express Their Feelings in Ways Other than Talking

Children may use play or creative activities, such as drawing or writing, to express their grief. Often, they come to a better understanding of grief through play and creative outlets. These expressions can offer some important clues about what children are thinking, but it is important not to jump to conclusions. For example, young children who produce very happy drawings after a traumatic death might give the impression that they are not affected by the death. In fact, this is more likely a sign that the child is not yet ready to deal with the grieving process. Similarly, teens who only want to listen to “happy” music or see “happy” movies may be signaling that they are not ready to open up to the profound emotions of grief.

Children Often Feel Guilty After a Death Has Occurred

Young children have a limited understanding of why things happen as they do. They often use magical thinking—they believe their own thoughts, wishes, and actions can make things happen in the greater world beyond their own control. Adults may reinforce this misconception when they suggest that children make a wish for something they want to happen.

Magical thinking is useful at times. Being able to wish for things to be better in their lives and in the world can help young children feel stronger and more in control; however, there is also a downside. When something tragic happens, such as the death of a family member, children may believe it happened because of something they said, did, thought, or wished.

Older children and teens usually wonder if there is something they could have done, or should have done, to prevent the death. For example, the parent would not have had a heart attack if the child had not misbehaved and caused stress in the family. The car crash would not have happened if the child did not need to be picked up after school. The cancer would not have progressed if the child had just made sure the parent had seen a doctor.

In addition, children often feel guilty for surviving the death of a sibling. They may also feel guilty if they are having fun or not feeling very sad after a family member has died. When talking with children about the death of someone close, it is appropriate to assume that some sense of guilt is likely present. This will usually be the case even if there is no logical reason for the children to feel responsible.

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