# Grief Reactions in Childhood & Adolescence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Beliefs about Death</th>
<th>Grief Reactions</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
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| Birth-2 years | • No understanding of death  
• Aware that loved one is gone  
• Senses change in routine  
• Senses parental grief | • General distress, protest  
• Crying  
• Anxiety  
• Sleeplessness  
• Indigestion  
• Sucking or biting  
• Throwing | • Physical contact and reassurance  
• Consistent nurturing figure  
• Maintain routines  
• Meet immediate physical needs  
• Include in funeral/mourning rituals when appropriate |
| 3-5 years    | • No understanding of permanence of death  
• Believes death to be like sleep, temporary, reversible  
• Magical thinking and fantasies | • Anxiety/ Fear  
• Sadness  
• Confusion  
• Insecurity  
• Agitation (especially at night)  
• Regressive behaviors  
• Repeated questioning  
• Nightmares  
• Reenacts scenes of death in play  
• May act as if nothing has happened | • Physical contact and reassurance  
• Allow time for play and fun  
• Simple, honest answers to questions  
• Patience with repetitive questions  
• Maintain routines  
• Allow for expression of feelings  
• Include in funeral/mourning rituals |
| 6-9 years    | • Understands death is final and irreversible  
• Interested in physical aspects of death  
• Does not think death will happen to them  
• Early spiritual concepts  
• Worries that caregiver(s) will die too  
• Worries that his/her thoughts or actions caused death  
• Does not want to appear different from peers | • Sadness  
• Anger  
• Confusion  
• Anxiety/ Fear  
• Guilt  
• Regressive behavior  
• Lots of questions  
• Hide feelings/withdrawal  
• Nightmares/sleep disturbance  
• Difficulty concentrating, completing school work  
• Acting out/Aggression  
• Attempt to be “perfect child”  
• May act as if nothing happened | • Physical contact and reassurance  
• Allow some regressive behavior  
• Spend time together  
• Allow time for play and physical activity/sports  
• Simple honest answers to questions  
• Watch for confusion, feelings of responsibility for the death  
• Encourage drawing, music, reading, art, dance  
• Reassure child that he/she will always be taken care of  
• Include in funeral/mourning rituals; let child choose how to be involved  
• Work with teacher/school to make school work manageable |
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Developmental Changes</th>
<th>Concurrent Developmental Changes</th>
<th>Be understanding of mood fluctuations and regressive behaviors</th>
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| 9-12 years | - Understands death is final and irreversible  
- Denial  
- Worries that his/her actions caused the death  
- High death awareness (worries someone else close to them will die)  
- Thinks about future life milestones without deceased (weddings, graduations, etc.)  
- Continuing to form spiritual concepts  
- Does not want to appear different from peers | - Concurrent developmental changes heighten grief feelings  
- Shock  
- Sadness  
- Anger  
- Confusion  
- Loneliness/Isolation  
- Fear/Vulnerability  
- Regressive behavior  
- Fluctuating moods  
- Hides feelings, withdrawal may act as if death never happened  
- Difficulty concentrating, completing school work  
- Sleep disturbances  
- Acting out/Aggression  
- Focuses on physical aspects of illness and death | - Be understanding of mood fluctuations and regressive behaviors  
- Make yourself available to listen and talk  
- Answer questions honestly  
- Offer physical contact  
- Encourage expression of feelings through art, music, writing, sports, etc.  
- Find peer support groups  
- Involve in funeral decisions/mourning rituals; let child choose how to be involved  
- Work with teacher/school to make school work manageable |
| 12 years & older | - Understands death is final, irreversible and universal  
- Denial  
- High death awareness (worries someone else close to them will die)  
- Thinks about future life milestones without deceased (weddings, graduations, etc.)  
- Personal death awareness  
- May use spirituality to cope | - Self-conscious; does not want to appear different from peers  
- Desire to be in control of feelings, reluctant to show feelings in public  
- Shock  
- Sadness  
- Anger  
- Confusion  
- Loneliness/Isolation  
- Fear/Vulnerability  
- Fluctuating moods  
- Difficulty concentrating, completing school work  
- Sleep disturbances  
- Changes in eating patterns  
- Acting out/Aggression  
- Fighting, screaming, arguing  
- Impulsive/High risk behavior  
- Role confusion (e.g. have to be the “man of the house” now)  
- Similar reaction as adults, but has fewer coping skills to draw on | - Be understanding of mood fluctuations and regressive behaviors  
- Make yourself available to listen and talk  
- Answer questions honestly  
- Allow privacy and keeping feelings hidden unless there is risk of harm  
- Offer physical contact  
- Encourage expression of feelings through art, music, writing, sports, etc.  
- Watch for high risk behavior  
- Find peer support groups  
- Involve in funeral decisions/mourning rituals; let teen choose how to be involved  
- Work with teacher/school to make school work manageable |