

Promoting Resilience When your Child Faces the Loss of a Classmate

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Parents can gently support their children as they accomplish the four psychological tasks relative to facing a significant loss; understanding, grieving, commemorating, and going on.

Understanding: Developmentally, elementary age children have different capacities to understand death than their older siblings or adults. They may not understand the finality and universality of death. Understanding what happened is central to the mourning process; not having information at this time can be confusing and overwhelming. Speculation is a normal reaction as they struggle to understand. However, without accurate information, it is not useful and leads to even more confusion. Your sympathetic acknowledgement that it's difficult 'not to know' is important. As a reference here is a general overview of the understanding of death based on a child's age.

- ✚ **Preschoolers (ages 3-5):** These youngsters see death as temporary and reversible. They believe the dead live on under changed circumstances—either on a cloud in a city called Heaven or in a box under the ground connected to other boxes by tunnels. Preschoolers ask many questions, often gross and grubby, about how one lives on. No matter how well death is explained, many will persist in their beliefs about its reversibility. These children are likely to be literal and concrete in their thinking.
- ✚ **Latency (ages 6-8):** Children in this developmental stage see death as a person or spirit that comes to get you if handicapped (because they can't run fast enough) and the klutzes (meaning you aren't fast or clever enough to escape). Death for them is not universal. From their perspective, only certain groups of people die, for example the elderly, and it is difficult to understand death when people are neither elderly nor handicapped. In an effort to make themselves feel different and therefore safe, children will often find some specific way, frequently negatively, to differentiate themselves from people who die. The safety of their own small life is important to validate. Children this age need an adult to offer perspective; e.g. "Most people live to be very, very, very old..." They often ask for details to better understand what happened.
- ✚ **Preadolescents (ages 9-12):** These youngsters have a more adult understanding of death, seeing it as final, universal and irreversible. They are interested in rituals and concerned with how the world will change because of the death of a particular person. This age group is frequently described as having the easiest time dealing with death and dying because they tend to intellectualize as a way of coping with the experience. They can sometimes sound crass and uncaring. They will also worry if the bereaved adults in their life will ever be the same.
- ✚ **Adolescents (age 12+):** Adolescents work hard to make sense of their own eventual death and the death of others. Just when they are being asked to take responsibility for their own lives, they are confronted by experiences that challenge their own lives; they are confronted by experiences that challenge their belief in their own immortality. They privately worry about the consequences of their own risk-taking behaviors while publicly proclaiming their invulnerability. They are emotionally vulnerable when a death occurs and often sob or hug each other. They are concerned about what it is worth living for and what it is worth dying for. They want to

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understand adult rituals at the time of death, but often prefer to develop their own. Their grief at times of death tends to be expressed with peers rather than family members, often causing adults to believe the adolescent is not grieving. Adolescents are embarrassed when people know their parent or brother/sister had died because they feel this makes them different than others their own age.

Grieving: Some children may be visibly upset, while others may appear to show little or no reaction. Still others may act out, laugh or act inappropriately. Often anger may be expressed before sadness. If your child doesn't want to talk to you about his/her feelings, it is normal and should be respected. They may reach out to peers, and find distractions to avoid the sadness and confusion.

- ✚ Electronic media may become central gathering places for your children to share their feelings and reactions. Your thoughtful monitoring the amount of time and the content of your children's electronic communications is helpful.
- ✚ Of course, demonstrating *your* feelings at this time is normal and expected. However, it is reassuring to your child that, in spite of your sadness, you are still able to carry out the typical duties of parenting. As important is acknowledging your child's feelings without attempting to mitigate them.
- ✚ More reactions: Headaches, stomach aches, fears about their health, their parents' health, difficulty eating, sleeping or concentrating are also normal at this time. When the symptoms are persistent and/or intense, checking in with your child's pediatrician is advisable.

Commemoration:

- ✚ **Formal** commemoration rituals, such as wakes, funerals, shiva, memorial services can help us cope with sadness as we remember the person who died. If you and your child decide to participate, providing anticipatory guidance is critical, especially if this is unfamiliar territory to your child. You know your child best; your presence and support is reassuring.
- ✚ **Informal** commemoration: Remembering the person who died, telling stories and sharing memories help us all cope. When your child is ready, encourage him/her to share memories with friends. Some children may choose to journal, write poetry, or listen to music that helps them express their feelings. Others may choose to send a note or visit their classmate's sibling or family at a later time.

Going On: When returning to school following the summer break, your child may feel anxious about what to expect; who will talk about it? How should he be? How will classmates and teachers be coping? Will it feel different? Reassure your child that although it is not 'business as usual', teachers and school counselors will provide a platform of support and expected school structure to insure a healthy, emotionally safe transition to returning to school this fall.