



Tips for Tots



Tip #5:

Guiding Young Children Through Grief

Strategies

Did you know?

Infant/Toddler:

It is difficult to assess how much infants grieve. What we know to be true is that they react with distress to major changes in their environment. They may sense the distress of others around them after a death occurs causing disruption in their world. The absence of smiling faces, constant exposure to new and unfamiliar faces and noises, can cause periods of crying, irritability and disruption in their eating and sleeping patterns. When toddlers become aware that something significant has happened in their world and that someone important to them is missing, they may respond with temper tantrums, outbursts of anger, show little interest in toys, activities and food during this time. They may also revert to thumb sucking, curling up in a fetal position or demonstrate other infantile behaviors to cope with their distress.

Preschool:

Preschoolers grieve; they feel loss and experience other strong emotions following the death of a loved one. They may seem totally confused at this time. Children this age are still sorting out and testing reality. They may initially appear to know and accept what has happened, and as time passes, they may ask when the deceased loved one is coming back. During this time, children this age may display regressive behaviors. Becoming clingy & whiny, wetting the bed or thumb sucking can be common. These behaviors can be soothing for them when they are feeling anxious and confused and need the attention of a caregiver. Some children may show ambivalence and carry on with their *normal* routines as a way of coping and some will express their grief through play.

Infant/Toddler:

- Keep the infant’s care routine on schedule and as normal as possible. Caregivers who are familiar with the infant’s patterns should remain constant and consistent.
- Minimize unusual sounds and events near the infant until the home has returned as much as possible to the way it was before the death.
- Infants need normalcy as much as possible. Shield infants/toddlers from too much contact with unfamiliar faces, voices, sounds & scents.
- Feeding times, storytelling times, singing & holding should continue without disruption.
- Be patient with the changes in your infant/toddler’s behavior, their world as they know it is not the same and they are trying to make sense of it.

Preschool:

- Define death in concrete terms. Avoid the phrases that “soften the blow”, such as “sleeping”, “went away”, “God took him”. This will only scare and confuse the child.
- Let your child ask questions. Answer truthfully! Be honest, simple and direct.
- Use basic words like “die” & “dead” to convey the message.
- Observe your child’s play to understand his/her thoughts, feelings, and ideas about the death.
- Play with the child (dolls, drawing, imagining) in ways that will allow the child to express his/her feelings.
- Discuss and have the child recognize changes in daily routines due to the death.
- Read to or have your child read books related to death (local libraries are a good resource). Examples: “Goodbye Mousie,” by Robie H. Harris or “I’ll Always Love You,” by Hans Wilhelm.
- Familiarize yourself with the topic by reading books such as, “35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child,” and “Children and Grief –Helping Your Child Understand Death.
- Remember, a child will have the same feelings that we have but they do have a different level of understanding.

Resources:

Guiding Your Child Through Grief; MA Emsweiler, JP Emsweiler
COVE Center for Grieving Children & Families: www.covect.org
When Families Grieve- www.sesamestreet.org/grief

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