



The Grief of Preschoolers and the Questions They Ask

HIGHMARK.
CARING PLACE



*A Center for Grieving Children,
Adolescents and Their Families*



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Are Preschoolers Too Young to Grieve?

People wonder, “Do young children grieve?”

Children *do* grieve. Grief is the natural response to love and loss. Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve.

But young children grieve differently than we adults do. They grieve in small doses at a time—in brief expressions of emotion, and then go on as if nothing had happened. Developmentally, they are not yet able to take in the enormity of what happened all at once.

Young children also don’t have the vocabulary, or the ability with words, to be able to talk about their feelings the way that adults or older children are able to.

But they are still “sad on the inside,” even without the words to say so. What preschoolers need is our support, on a daily basis, but especially when they are sad or grieving.

*A child who is old enough
to love is old enough
to grieve.*



The Importance of a Preschooler's Questions

Young children do grieve the death of a loved one, but they need to have the death explained. Even the concept of death itself remains fuzzy for this age group.

Because of their confusion over what it means to be dead, preschoolers typically ask a lot of questions, and they will ask the same questions over and over again as well. Each time you answer it, they may hear it a little differently, with a greater level of understanding.

But more than a cognitive understanding, what the child is seeking is a connection, a connection with you, and a reassurance that the world continues to be safe.

What's important is what's *behind* the questions. The child is looking to you to make sure the world is still OK.

This reassurance is needed on the most basic human level. The words you say matter, but far more, it's how you say the words, and the child's feelings as a result of your words, that will make a difference. Look into the child's eyes. Get down onto their level (squat down, or sit on the floor). Let them know that you think they're important enough to spend time with.



A child's world is made up largely of the child themselves and those closest to them. So by taking the time to talk and to listen, demonstrating to the child that your relationship with them is still strong, you're also letting them know that the world itself is safer.

Children's questions sometimes also reflect their fears about the death. They may fear they caused the person to die. You can reassure the child that they did not make the person die, and you can help them to understand that the person who died did not want to leave them.

They might also wonder if they or someone else they love is going to die. Though you can't promise that you'll never die, you can truthfully tell the child of your intention to stay with them and take care of them until they grow up and can take care of themselves.

"It is precisely because young children don't understand what death is all about that they especially need us to talk about it with them."

— Hedda Bluestone Sharapan



Developmental Issues

Permanence — When a person dies, preschoolers don't comprehend the death as permanent. They experience death more as an absence rather than their loved one being “permanently” gone.

Young children will react to death as a loss, a separation. Because of their limited concept of time, they will wonder if the person who died is coming back. They may also wonder if they can go “visit” them. It's also common to have a child see their Grandpa buried at the funeral, and then hear the child ask if Grandpa will still be coming over for Sunday dinner.

Concreteness — Because of their inability to process complex concepts, explanations to children about death need to be concrete and brief. Respond only to their exact question without providing corresponding explanations.

What a young child asks you is usually all they want to know. Using small words and short sentences, while adding as many feeling words as possible, helps the child gain understanding.

Using the words dead, death, and died will help the preschooler to understand the real meaning of these words.

Taking Things Literally — Children will interpret what we say literally; therefore, it's important to avoid using euphemisms or metaphors when talking to children about death.

Telling a young child that grandma “went to sleep” might make them wonder when she's going to wake up—or could cause the child to fear going to sleep himself or herself.

Explaining that Daddy went on a “trip” into the clouds may cause the child to be angry at Dad for not taking the child with him.


Saying that we “lost” their sister may cause the child to go out into the neighborhood to look for her.

Using the words *dead*, *death*, and *died* will help the preschooler to understand the real meaning of these words and concepts over time and will avoid longer-term confusion and misunderstanding.

“So, there are no books that will do it for us and there are no magic ‘right’ words to say. It’s the trying, the sharing, and the caring—the wanting to help and the willingness to listen—that says, ‘I care about you.’ When we know that we do care about each other, then, together, we can talk about even the most difficult things and cope with even the most difficult times.”

—Hedda Bluestone Sharapan

from *Talking With Young Children About Death:
A Message From Fred Rogers*



*Preschoolers need to
feel safe and secure.
Preschoolers need help
with their feelings, no
matter what they are.*

*Preschoolers need caring
adults with whom they can
express their feelings and
fears, their grief and
gladness, their silliness and
sadness. They need to be
able to be themselves and
be accepted and liked for
who they are.*

This brochure is one of a four-part series
on questions grieving children ask.

About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place to:

- Raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- Provide programs to address those needs
- Equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one

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