



The Grief of Preschoolers

Are Preschoolers Too Young to Grieve?

People wonder, “Do young children grieve?”

The answer is—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 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 provide an answer, 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 how the child feels 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 himself or herself 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 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. For yourself, 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 also wouldn't be surprising to have a child see their grandpa buried at the funeral, and then 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.

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 Daddy 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.

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.

"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

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
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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