

CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO BEREAVEMENT

Within a family, each member will be affected differently by the bereavement. These differences are due to many varied factors which include:

- The individual's relationship with the person who died
- The state of that relationship at the time of death (e.g. had there been a quarrel or upset feelings?)
- Prior history of loss or traumatic events.
- The degree of dependency upon the one who died.
- The survivor's emotional and psychological development

Children are especially vulnerable for many reasons:

They are dependent on the adults in their lives, and are affected not only by the loss of a family member but also by the changes in caretaking which are inevitable when a family is grieving.

Young children do not have the life experience or cognitive development to grapple with the nature and finality of death. They are vulnerable to "magical thinking" and will often assume that they may have somehow contributed to the death. It is quite difficult for children to approach grieving adults for information so they come to their own conclusions about culpability (e.g. I wasn't quiet enough when I was playing so Mom couldn't get better).

In our desire to protect children during tragic circumstances, we may cut them off from their own experience. Children want to be part of family tragedy as well as the happy times. It is more valuable to help them be present and share the grieving than to attempt to distract the child through presents or outings.

Children have a different way of grieving:

Children's grief is often episodic. A child may engage you in deep and painful questions and then return to play as though nothing had been said. The child isn't being heartless or uncaring --this is a wonderful way children have of protecting themselves from emotional overload.

The grieving child may not look depressed and may even seem a little hyperactive. This seems to be another defensive strategy which allows them to "medicate" their sad and worried feelings with play.

It is the nature of children to be self-centered, so try not to reproach them if this surfaces. Children often express security concerns, e.g. "So, who is going to take care of me now?" and this can sound harsh to adult ears. It is important to accept and respond to these fears so that the child's basic sense of security is not undermined by the bereavement.

Children mourn to the degree that their cognitive and emotional development allows and then the grieving often becomes latent. Feelings of loss continue to surface and different developmental stages as the child acquires more capacity to metabolize the loss. And this process usually continues into adulthood.

