

IMPLICATIONS OF DEVELOPMENT FOR CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO BEREAVEMENT (3 - 7 YEARS)

Children at this development stage may be in very different places on the axes of their intellectual, physical and emotional development. Like all of us, these children also have a tendency to regress in the face of stress, and may temporarily lose some of their developmental gains. Here are things to keep in mind and suggestions for responding:

You may see clinginess, bedwetting, difficulty separating, an inability to sleep alone, repeated questions. Accept the regression as temporary and don't worry about it. It is a coded request for comfort. When you talk to the child say something like: "This is a hard time for all of us, we all have a lot of feelings. You can stay with me today/sleep in our bed/ etc. while we are getting used to what happened". And just keep answering the question as clearly and simply as possible, perhaps acknowledging that this is tough stuff to understand .

Children at this stage are still mastering the concept of time and beginnings and endings. The finality of death is hard to grasp even when they are able to use the vocabulary appropriately. Ask the child to tell you what happens when someone dies. "Do they still eat? Do they still talk? Do they still play?" And expect the child to ask you again. Make sure they understand the difference between sleeping and being dead and avoid confusing by your use of euphemisms. (Don't say, "She went to sleep" when you really mean that the person died.)

Be aware that young children cannot reliably think abstractly or figuratively and be alert to the misunderstandings that can come up. If someone says, "God took her to live with him", many children will visualize a hand coming out of the sky and taking that person away. And this can be a frightening thought, rather than the comfort that was intended.

Young children are supposed to be self-centered, this is a survival mechanism, but it makes them very vulnerable to feeling omnipotent and therefore potentially responsible for things that happen. Many children benefit from gentle exploration about whether they worry that they may have done something to cause illness or accident, especially if they have been upset with the person who died. A child may need repeated reassurance about this issue.

Children also tend to think that if two things happen together, then one caused the other. This also can give rise to painful distortions about who was responsible for the death.

Children need to learn how to respond appropriately. Try not to reproach the child for morbid questions, "What does the body look like now? What color was the tumor? Who is going to be my Daddy now?" These are just the child's attempt to make sense of what has happened.

Talk to the child about your feelings of sadness, but try not to let your child see you overwhelmed. It is valuable to share feelings, but your child will benefit from seeing you coping in spite of your pain. S/he needs to know that your family can function, even when tragedy strikes close to home.

All the children will be affected by a loss that is close to them and will be doing a lot of learning and understanding. Having an interested, accepting listener to assist this process is a wonderful gift for life.