

Riverside Trauma Center

UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEF OF CHILDREN

Following the death of a loved one, parents may:

- Have difficulty discussing and explaining death to a child.
- Have their own difficulty dealing with death
- Assume that the children cannot cope with death.
- Try to protect the child by leaving him out of discussions and rituals associated with death.

Thus, children may feel anxious, bewildered and alone. They may be left on their own to seek answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and reassurance of those around them.

There are four major emotions that those in grief pass through: fear, anger, guilt and sadness.

- All children are affected by a death in the family.
- Children need love from significant people in their lives, maintaining their own security.
- Young children may not verbalize their feelings about death.
- They may hold back their feelings because they are overwhelming.
- Children express their feelings through behavior and play.
- Children do grieve, often very deeply.
- Each adult and child’s reactions to death are individual in nature.

COMMON, NORMAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN IN GRIEF:

SHOCK	May not believe the death occurred and will act as though it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.
PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS	May have various complaints such as headache or stomachache and fear that she/he, too, will die.
ANGER	Being mostly concerned with his own needs. May be angry at the person who died because she/he feels she/he has been left ‘all alone’ or that God didn’t ‘make the person well..
GUILT	May think that she/he caused the death by having been angry with the person who died, or she/he may feel responsible for not having been ‘better’ in some way.
ANXIETY and FEAR	May wonder who will take care of him/her now or fear that some other person he/she loves will die. May cling to his/her parents or ask other people who play an important role in his/her life if they love him/her.
REGRESSION	May revert to behaviors she/he had previously outgrown, such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.
SADNESS	May show a decrease in activity—being ‘too quiet.’

In the grief process, time is an important factor. Experts have said that around six months after a significant death in a child’s life, normal routine should be resuming. If the child’s reaction seems to be prolonged, seeking professional advice from those who are familiar with the child (e.g., teachers, pediatricians and clergy), may be helpful.