



Children and adults
do not grieve the same way.

Things to Remember

- Children express themselves directly and physically
- Talking about death is difficult
- Children will grieve/play/grieve
- A child's magical thinking makes them believe their thoughts caused the person's death
- Children understand death better as they grow older

What could my child be feeling?

- Confusion
 - Sorrow, anger
 - Lost in their thoughts
 - Fearful
 - Insecure
- Guilt
 - Abandonment, separation anxiety
 - and several other feelings

An adult might think talking about the death of a loved one is too traumatic for a child. However, children grow emotionally from the grief experience if they get to grieve with their family, have their questions answered, and get the chance to say goodbye to someone they loved.

Babies and young children have very few memories of the deceased. Stories of "Remember when..." describing their involvement, strengthen their sense of family belonging and connection to the person who died.



Frequent Concerns and Questions

- What are the normal grief reactions of a child?
- What are the needs of a child?
- How do I talk about death with my child?
- Should I bring my child to the hospital?
- Should they see the body?
- When should my child return to school?
- Should I talk to their friends or teachers?
- Should I bring my child to the funeral home and the ceremony?
- How will I know if my child needs help?

The Needs of the Child

- Honesty and simple language
- To be able to trust people
- To be listened to and to have their questions answered
- Love, security, routines of daily living
- To be involved in family discussions
- Respect for their needs (i.e., age, wishes, capabilities, etc.)
- Support to find the words to express what they feel : "Do you feel sick to your stomach when you think of mom?"

Factors that Could Influence Reactions

- Support received from families and friends
- Age, maturity level, and personality
- Relationship with the deceased
- The different types of separation they have experienced
- The circumstances and cause of death

How Children Perceive Death

The concept of death is very complex. Understanding comes with age and emotional development. Children give us the impression they understand, but their questions tell us otherwise: "Will Daddy be home for Christmas? You are not going to die, are you? What happens when you die?"

It is difficult to know if a child or adolescent understood your explanation about death. Children need to understand:

- Death means the body is no longer functioning
- Everyone dies
- Death does not happen because of bad thoughts
- Death is part of the cycle of life
- A body cannot come back to life after dying

This seems obvious to adults, but many children do not fully understand death before the age of 12 years. Respect your child's ability to cope.

Do not hesitate to say that death is mysterious and it is normal to feel confused.

Discussing Death

By the parents or relative as soon as possible:

- In a private place
 - With the help of healthcare professionals
 - Give time, answer questions, and repeat as needed
- Simple and direct language: "Your father was in a bad accident. He is not coming home because he died."

The Hospital Visit

What is preferable:

- Involve children in family discussions
- Prepare and accompany them to the bedside
- Allow children to see the dead body
- Respect the child's decisions
- Allow children to say goodbye (i.e., drawings, letters, photos, rituals, etc.)

"Locked up grief won't go away on its own; instead it grows, poisoning and feeding on the silence, without us even knowing it. Encourage children who are ignoring their suffering to cry, this is the most charitable service you can offer them."
— Duprey, 1992

Funeral Rituals have Four Main Functions:

- Confirms the finality of death
- Encourages the expression of grief and sorrow
- Expression of community support
- Confirms that life goes on

"In sorrow, familiar faces are comforting, even if they are sad."
— Masson, 2006

Return to School:

- Parent-Teacher communication
- Rest and return to daily activities, respect the child's rhythm
- Open communication and support
- With the child's permission, speak with their friends as they can be a source of support
- Consult with healthcare professionals as needed

When to Worry About Your Child

You know your child best, you will likely know if they are struggling with something.

Reactions they might have:

- nightmares
 - insomnia
 - acting out at school or failing tests
 - clinging to you
- not talking to friends and family
 - being aggressive
 - acting like the person who has died

If your child's reactions seem to be excessive, ask for professional help.



Grief does not have predetermined time limits; over the years, you must help your child learn to cope with their grief.

Resources

Suicide-Action 1 800 appelle (227-3553)	Your local CLSC
Deuil-Jeunesse www.deuil-jeunesse.com 418 670-9772	Quebec Order of Psychologists www.ordrepsy.qc.ca 1 800 561-1223
Canadian Virtual Hospice www.deuildesenfants.ca	ODTSQ (Social Workers Association) 1 888-731-9420

References

Masson, J. *Mort, mais pas dans mon cœur*. Logiques, 2010.
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