



Responding to Bereavement and Loss: Developmental Factors

Preschool to Early Elementary Children

Developmental Considerations:

- Beginnings of concrete reasoning
- Magical thinking

In the Event of Death:

- Belief that death is reversible or temporary (magical thinking: If I wish hard enough I can change what happened.)
- Can come to understand the permanence of death
- Worries linked primarily to concern about only those child knows

Behavior Changes After Loss

- Whiny
- Clingy
- Withdrawn & subdued
- Acting out the loss and surrounding activities in play
- Regressive behaviors (e.g., baby talk, needing more help with daily activities, bed-wetting)

Elementary School-aged Children

Developmental Considerations

- Language matures, but children take words literally
 - Misconceptions and misattributions
- Understanding of permanency, inevitability, finality, and causality (usually by five to seven years)
- Further development of empathy
- Worry begins to expand to those they may not know who are impacted in similar ways

In the Event of Death

- “Me”-oriented thinking may lead to the notion that it was the child’s words or thoughts that led to the death (e.g., “When I told my sister ‘I wish you were dead,’ did I cause it to occur?”).
- Fantasy and magical perceptions may influence the interpretation of the loss.
- Clichés associated with death (e.g., having the pet “put to sleep”) may be taken literally.
- Adults may observe events surrounding a death seen in play.

Adolescents

Developmental Considerations

- Increased abstract thinking
- Thinking about the future
- Continued feelings of blame and guilt
- Better appreciation of personal mortality and death
- Personal vulnerability, masked by acting detached from death

In the Event of Death

- High-risk behaviors
 - Absenteeism
 - Substance abuse/alcohol use
 - Promiscuity
 - Reckless driving
- Increased withdrawal and indifference
- Discussions and/or fascination with death and dying
- Concern about the future and their place in it
- Increased risk for depression and suicide