

Helping A Child Deal With Grief

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Tonya cried quietly behind the funeral home where visitation for her grandmother was being held. “It will never be the same,” she said over and over to herself.

Her grandmother had died two days earlier. Tonya had been uncharacteristically listless and quiet ever since, which surprised her mother. Tonya was only six years old. Certainly she was saddened by her grandmother’s passing. But such grief?

Yes, children often feel grief when someone close to them dies.

Young children may see death as something temporary that can be undone. But after about age five, children start to realize that death is permanent. And the death of someone close can affect their behavior for days or weeks.

Depending on their age, it is not unusual for children to be shocked by a death, or not understand and refuse to accept it at first. Some may slip into fantasy to ease their pain, and some may even get angry at the person who died for leaving them. If this is the case, be sympathetic. Allow your child to talk about their anger or sadness.

Some children, who tend to think they control what happens around them, may believe a death is somehow their fault. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and reassure them that they had nothing to do with the death.

Funerals can be important experiences for children. They see how much other people cared for the deceased and how they comfort survivors. And the funeral publicly marks the end of that person’s life.

But funerals can also be distressing to children. They may need comforting and an explanation about what is happening.

They should not be forced to go to a funeral if they seriously object. Find another way to observe the death, such as by lighting a candle for the deceased.

Be truthful, but don’t frighten a child when talking about death. Don’t say the deceased is “sleeping,” because a young child may become afraid to go to sleep. And if you want your child to think of God as a source of comfort, don’t say God “took” the dead person.

Children usually rebound well. But pay attention to how your child behaves. Watch for signs of depression, such as troubled sleep or loss of appetite over several weeks, withdrawal, a sharp drop in school performance, or repeated talk about wanting to join the deceased. If you observe these or any other troubling behaviors, call your doctor.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.