

## Understanding the Grieving Child

While the grief of another adult is painful to witness, the grief of a child is particularly difficult to watch. Because children are *children*, the ways in which they express and work through their feelings of loss differ significantly from those of other children just a few years younger or older. The writer and researcher Terese Rando discusses ways that children are “disadvantaged” as grievers when compared to adults. Because thinking abilities develop as the child physically matures, young children are truly unable to understand that death is permanent and irreversible. Developing an understanding of the permanency of the loss will occur over time as cognitive skills develop.

Rando reminds us that finding the words to express grief is often a challenge for adults. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that children lack the vocabulary with which to describe feelings, thoughts and memories. Children’s feelings and distress tend to be expressed in *behaviors* such as play or increased anxiousness, clinging, irritability, withdrawal and sleep and eating disturbances. Likewise, part of a child’s cognitive development involves maturation of abilities to think abstractly. Until those abilities develop in mid-to-late childhood, children think in very concrete and literal terms. Explanations that seem perfectly clear to adults can be easily misinterpreted by children—“losing grandma” has a very different meaning to a child who cannot yet understand the difference between euphemism and a literal statement of fact.

Children are also limited by a lack of experience and information that can inform their concerns, expectations and conclusions. A great deal of a child’s learning occurs through observation, yet children typically have little preparatory exposure to helpful information or similar role models, such as can be gained through books or interactions with grieving peers and their families. Children do “eavesdrop” on to adult conversations as they try to make sense of their experience. Misinterpretation of adult conversation and limited access to age-appropriate information can lead children to draw any number of faulty conclusions that may inhibit grief resolution.

The ability of children to engage in play or other childhood activities in the face of loss is often confusing to adults. It is important to recognize that children have not yet developed the capacity to tolerate pain intensely over prolonged periods, as adults can. In order to protect themselves from being overwhelmed, children will grieve intermittently, approaching their grief for a time and pulling back at other times. Play, fantasy and creative expression are the avenues through which children typically work through their concerns. When death intrudes, it should come as no surprise that these activities reflect grief’s shadow.

In situations where the death results in major dislocations to family stability, children may delay actively approaching their grief until they sense that it is safe to express their feelings. It is not uncommon for children to appear as if they are coping very well in the early months following the death, only to later exhibit behavioral difficulties and academic problems that reflect their internal distress.

As developmental milestones are reached and cognitive abilities mature, children can be expected to revisit their loss experience. Grief resolution is clearly a process of adaptation that takes place over months and years, mirroring cognitive, emotional and psychological growth, rather than an event marked by an end date. Understanding this, concerned adults will recognize that support for the grieving child is an ongoing process.

Support can be provided in a variety of ways. Certainly sensitive listening with an ear toward validating and normalizing feelings, providing age-appropriate information and reassurance, and correcting misperceptions and faulty conclusions are essential. Reminiscing and remembering the loved one helps the child to develop a sense of their own personal history as well as a sense of where they fit in the ongoing family narrative. Age appropriate books and stories can provide information and role models as well as normalize the child’s feelings and concerns. Talking with other children who have been through similar losses through opportunities such as Camp Pathways or youth support groups helps to end their isolation and fears of being “different”.

*Pathways of Hope* is here to provide support to grieving children, caregivers, and other concerned adults. Whether it is through direct support such as individual counseling or art therapy, providing information and grief resources, consultation or school based-support, services are as close as the phone. If you are concerned about a grieving child or teen, please give us a call at (937) 258-4991. Services are available at no charge thanks to the support of community donors.