



Independent School District #1 Aitkin Public Schools

"A community in continuous pursuit of educational excellence for all"

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Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers, parents and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones.

- **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- **Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- **Grieving is a process, not an event:** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.
- **Don't lie or tell half truths to children about the tragic event:** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- **Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:** Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- **Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:** Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- **Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- **Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:** Sometimes children are upset but they may not be able to tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings, and they may be able to tell you what they need to feel better.

- **Children will need long-lasting support:** The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.
- **Keep in mind that grief work is hard:** It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- **Be aware of your own need to grieve:** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

Developmental Phases in Understanding Death

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

Infants and Toddlers: The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death. Ages 2-6: Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death.

Ages 6-9: Children at this age start to comprehend the finality of death, though this understanding is not complete. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family. Children may not be able to accept the fact that death happens to everyone.

Ages 9-12: Children at this age may still take responsibility for the death of someone else. Understanding is increasing, and children in this age group range can probably handle most of the information given to an adult. Parents should remember that children under stress will often regress. Therefore, some children may not be able to handle all of the details.

Teens: Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

Resources

For additional information, resources, and/or support, please contact Mrs. Jensen at 218-927-4838 ext. 2125 or Mr. Dokken at 218-927-4838 ext. 2106

How do school-aged children (5 to 12 years) grieve?

School-aged children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible. Some children may still think that death is temporary or that the person who has died will feel things and be cold, lonely or hungry. Children increasingly become aware that death is an inevitable part of life and can become anxious about their own health and safety. They may be concerned that someone else they love may die.

Children may be interested in what has happened to the person after they have died, where they are now. They may ask blunt questions about what has happened to the person's body.

It is important to answer questions honestly and provide enough information so that children are not left with gaps in their knowledge. The risk of not enough information is that a child may fill this space with inaccurate information.

Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' can mean a child may feel that their thoughts, words or actions caused a death. They may feel guilty.

Continuing to answer questions and explain death to this age group is important. Their understanding will be developed over time and they may need to revisit what has happened and ask the same questions many times to make sense of their experience.

Children can feel insecure and frightened when things change. They will need lots of reassurance that they will be kept safe and be looked after.

Common reactions

- crying more, clinging and being fearful
- tantrums, being irritable or stubborn
- changes in eating or sleeping habits, less ability to play
- temporary regression (such as bedwetting, returning to baby talk)
- blaming themselves for the person's death

- looking for or sensing the person's presence
- being distracted and forgetful
- having increased anxiety for their safety and the safety of people they care about
- not wanting to be separated from caregivers
- not wanting to go to school
- having physical complaints (such as tummy pain, headaches)
- may try to suppress their emotions to protect the adults around them
- withdrawal from usual activities
- being quiet or not showing a response to the death
- feeling strong emotional reactions such as anger, guilt or a sense of rejection
- behavioral issues (such as aggression, tantrums, defiance, getting into trouble at school)
- may try to please adults and take on adult responsibilities
- temporary regression

Ways to support

- reassure your child they are safe and say who is looking after them (they may want to know who will look after them if you die)
- honestly explain death as a part of life using what they can see (use plants or insects as examples of death in nature)
- read children's books together about death and grief
- support them with touch - hugs, encouragement, holding their hand etc
- keep routine and normal boundaries around expected behavior
- tell them that you know they are sad, use words to describe feelings
- keep separation from loved adults and caregivers to a minimum
- make time to listen to their thoughts and questions and answer honestly
- include them in doing something for the funeral (such as drawing a picture to put in the casket or on the service sheet)
- encourage play - this is a natural form of communication and an opportunity to process what has happened
- encourage exercise