



## Understanding how children and adolescents experience grief.

Prior to reaching adulthood, many children will face the loss of a family member, friend or the family pet. Whilst some believe that a child cannot truly grieve until they reach adolescence, others such as British developmental psychologist John Bowlby (best known for Attachment Theory) suggest that infants as young as 6 months can experience grief reactions similar to that of adults. A young person's ability to understand death depends on their age and cognitive development. If very young, they may not have an understanding of time, particularly of "forever" or irreversibility and therefore the reality of the death will be difficult to integrate. Well-meaning adults sometimes give vague explanations, this can deprive young people of their own best means of managing pain and overcoming the effects of loss.

Young people grieve in doses. They will break grief up into bearable amounts and these can manifest in intense outbursts. In grief, children and teenagers tend to become an exaggerated version of their former selves. If they were very social before, they may become even more so and appear "shallow" to adults who see their social activities as inappropriate. If they were previously shy and withdrawn, they may become more so in grief. A heavy sense of responsibility is also very common. Normal symptoms of grief in children and adolescents will generally last for around 12 to 18 months, gradually improving over time. These include:

- Regression to bedwetting or thumb sucking
- Whining, crying or clinging to familiar adults
- Reduced ability to concentrate
- Major changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns
- Roller coaster ride of emotions - highs and lows
- Hyperactivity and "acting out", temper tantrums or aggression
- Poor school grades, bad behavior in class

Adults can help them adjust to an environment without the deceased by talking openly and truthfully, letting them express their feelings through things such as art, music, poetry,

storytelling, photography or play. A memorial, such as a special garden feature or photo collection is a good way of relocating the deceased person/animal in the child's life. It is also helpful to encourage attachment to another caring adult such as a trusted teacher, relative or friend. Most importantly, offer the time and space for the child to experience the full range of emotions associated with their grief. If you have experienced the loss too, it is vitally important that you work through your own grief as well as trying to help the child.

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