



Grieving Kids & Teens: Do's and Don'ts

Use truthful and clear information to explain the cause of death. Children are very literal and yet have a rich fantasy life. Their language skills develop long into adolescence and young adulthood. They also learn myths from other kids in the neighborhood, their family and their schools. Keep this in mind when you are trying to explain death and mourning rituals. Use simple and honest language and let them lead with questions they have. Avoid using colloquial sayings or religious explanations. Instead, use the actual terms for the cause of death. Explain that the cause of death is not contagious.

Acknowledge and validate their feelings. They may experience the full range of feelings (mad, sad, happy, afraid, lonely, relieved, etc.). Rather than tell a child or teen NOT to feel something, normalize their feelings. Let them know others have felt that way after someone close died. Remember that they can only tolerate grief in short spurts. It's normal for them to be upset one moment and then quickly want to play or change the subject.

Reassure them they are not to blame. Teenagers and kids younger than six years old often experience magical thinking and think the world revolves around them. As a result, they may believe they have caused the person to die. Let them know they could not have caused this.

Address their fears and anxiety. The most common fear after the death of a parent is that someone else will die. Tell them most people live to be very old, talk about what they and their family can do to stay healthy, and develop a plan about who will care for them should anything happen to their surviving relatives. Setting limits and providing consistent discipline also helps them feel safe.

Encourage them to continue routine activities. Kids and teens often desire a return to normal routines (going to school, continuing with activities, etc.). It's not uncommon for a child to want to go to school the day or day after someone has died. Although "keeping busy" just delays the grieving process, give them a choice about staying home, coming home early, or continuing with daily activities.

Include them in as many activities around the illness, injury, and death as they chose. According to Dr. Worden's Harvard study, the picture in a child's head is often worse than what actually happened. Also, children who are not allowed to go to the hospital, mourning ritual, or cemetery do worse than those who are prepared and make a choice to go or not go. To include them:

- 1) Prepare kids and teens for what they will see, hear, feel and/or smell.** Let them know what will take place, and what others may do during the experience.
- 2) Let them make an informed choice.** Give them time to think about it and choices that seem reasonable to you.
- 3) Share information and allow hospital visits and participation in the planning of and attendance at family mourning rituals.** Have someone (a friend of the family who is less involved) be assigned to the child/teen. This person should make sure the child/teens needs (play, bathroom breaks, food, and choices to leave) are taken care of.
- 4) Debrief with them.** Give children and teens a chance to talk about what they experienced. Then, have them share a fun or positive memory of this person before they died. Have them visualize this positive experience and remember it whenever they need it.

Adapted from Worden, J.W. (1996), Children and Grief: When a parent dies. Pages 140-147. Guilford Press, New York, NY.

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