



What to expect at different ages

While everyone grieves differently, there are some behaviors and emotions commonly expressed by children depending on their developmental level. A child's developmental level is influenced by more than just their actual age. Trauma, including grief, and a variety of life challenges can inform where a child is along the spectrum of development. These stages are not rigid and a child might show a mix of responses from more than one developmental stage.

Children, no matter what age, find consistency, routine, and flexibility to be helpful.



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0 to 2 years

Even children this young are aware of loss and separation and experience grief. Nurturing, predictable relationships with trusted adults are crucial for babies and young toddlers.

Concept of death/loss

Infants and toddlers are concrete in their thinking. Death and other losses are seen as temporary and reversible.

Common responses to grief

- Increased separation anxiety or not wanting the adult to be out of their sight.
- May regress on milestones or milestones may be delayed — they may start walking or talking a little later.
- Changes in feeding and sleeping habits. Babies and toddlers may want to eat more or avoid eating. You may notice a lot of anxiety or agitation around bedtime.
- Increased crying and distress.
- Infants and young toddlers have less ability to communicate verbally, so consider their behaviors as communicating their needs: their crying, clinginess, or irritability may be a request for increased nurturing.
- Toddlers who can communicate verbally may search for their caregiver, repeatedly asking “Where’s Mommy?” or “Daddy?”, since they do not understand the concept of permanence.

Ways to help

- Provide increased comfort through more nurturing physical contact — holding them more, rocking them, making eye contact.
- Provide a consistent and predictable routine, especially around sleep and eating patterns.
- If they are asking questions, use short, concrete, honest, and consistent answers such as “Daddy’s heart stopped working, that means he died.”
- Model appropriate grief responses for your child.
- Access support for yourself to help meet your own emotional and physical needs.



2 to 4 years

Children this age still don't fully understand that some losses, such as death, are permanent. Because preschoolers tend to be in the here and now, their grief reactions are typically brief but can be very intense. They are most likely to express themselves through their behavior and play.

Concept of death/loss

Young children may start to wonder if death, or other types of loss will happen to other people they know. You might hear questions like: "My mom died? When will she be home?" and "Will you go away too? What about me?"

Common responses to grief

- General anxiety
- Behavior regression — may need help with tasks they've already learned or habits they had previously outgrown
- Irregular sleep
- Crying
- Clinginess/need to be held
- Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers
- Repetitive questions
- Magical thinking — believing their thoughts and words have power
- Concerned about their safety and who will take care of them.

Ways to help

- Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day.
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.
- Provide short, honest explanations of what happened. "Mommy died. Her body stopped working." Use the words dead and died (or divorced, in prison, or deployed). Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- Provide opportunities for play, both big energy and quieter play.
- To help re-establish a sense of control, give choices whenever possible. "Do you want hot or cold cereal?"



5 to 8 years

Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They are very concrete thinkers, with a tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts.

Concept of death/loss

School-age children often still see death as reversible. They can also feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die or leave. They may say things like: "It's my fault. I was mad and wished she'd go away."

Common responses to grief

- Increased anxiety, including concerns about safety and abandonment
- Regressive behaviors — may need help with tasks they've already learned
- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Repetitive questions — How? Why? Who else?
- Nightmares
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, body pain

Ways to help

- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance. As kids get older their need for nurturing may look different — or turn out to be just the same as when they were two. Try to be flexible and creative in meeting their needs.
- Explain the death or change honestly using concrete language. "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the real word for what has happened (died, divorced, deployed, incarcerated). Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Keep it simple and let their questions lead the way in sharing more information and details.
- Be prepared for repetitive questions. Offer consistent responses, but also phrase things a little differently or add additional information as needed.
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"