

Suggestions:

Listed below are some suggestions that may help you support your children at this difficult time:

1. Listen to your child.
2. Try to maintain your child's routines by keeping your family together. Don't send children away "to protect them." If you need help handling things ask a friend or family member to stay with you at your home.
3. Be patient with yourself and your family. Grieving is hard work and exhausting.
4. Many times children express what is happening in their lives by drawing. Encourage younger children to draw or maybe write a story or journal. These can often give you an idea of what they are thinking. This can be therapeutic and can also be given as a gift to the baby (placing them in the casket, or tying them to the balloons before releasing them) which will be special to the surviving child.
5. Don't compare grief and crying with weakness.
6. Have more than one talk with your child at different times. Children are ready to know different things, but not necessarily all at once. Children can also develop more and different questions as they experience their grief. More talks will allow that ALL of their questions are answered.
7. Don't hide your own grief.

Children's perception of death at different ages

0-9 months

- No conception of death
- May respond more to parental grief; senses anxiety and sadness. May cry more.

9-18 months

- Responds to parental grief
- May ask simple questions
- May cling, refuse to have parent out of sight
- May sleep more, but awaken more frequently

18 months-5 yrs.

- See death as an altered and permanent state, but have trouble understanding it
- Respond to parental grief
- May have feelings of confusion and grief, especially if they didn't want the baby
- May experience disturbances in sleep and eating
- May regress to wetting, soiling, and baby talk and other baby habits
- May start psychosomatic complaints like "stomach ache," etc.
- May become withdrawn, irritable, dependent and demanding

5-8 yrs

- Feeling of guilt more prominent (wonder if they could have caused or prevented death)
- May be very upset, yet appears outwardly unaffected
- Hides tears out of fear of loss of control or parental disapproval
- Plays "death" or "funeral"

8-12 yrs.

- Acting out may increase; may become angry, irritable, aggressive and victimizing to friends and siblings
- Grades may suffer
- May have complaints of vague aches and pains
- May appear unaffected, but be inwardly frightened

12 yrs- teens

- Perceive death as an adult does
- May deny grief by withdrawal or depression
- May become angry; feel life is "unfair"
- Indulging in "risky behavior" is common. Boys tend to act out by fighting, driving fast, testing authority, or acting out sexually. Girls tend to seek out comfort which may become sexual with or without their awareness.
- Encourage teens to talk with a teacher or school counselor if they won't discuss feelings with you

Age Makes a Difference

Ages 2-6

Very young children may be more fussy or clingy, have changes in their eating or sleeping habits, and may fear going to sleep at night. At this age, they respond best to lots of physical comforting from you or another adult they know well.

Children are able to understand words before they can speak them well. So, simple explanations can be given to preschoolers. They are least likely to understand death and may think it's temporary or reversible: that the baby will be coming back. They may also worry about the baby being buried.

Very young children often believe that their wishes or thoughts could have caused the baby to die. They may now remember all the other events adults would not connect with the death make perfect sense to them. Having been told to always dress warmly before going outside, for example, they may think their mother forgot to do this and the baby got sick. The power of this "magical thinking" makes it important to use clear, simple explanations.

A real fear for children this age is that they might die, too, or that their parents will. You might want to reassure them that sometimes a baby stops growing before it is ready to be born. Or, that sometimes little babies' bodies stop working. But that this is not going to happen to them, or to you. You may find yourself answering the same questions about the baby's death several times. Preschoolers learn by repeating things over and over again.

Ages 6-9

School-age children usually understand that death is forever, so it may be more frightening for them. They may wish to avoid places or things they associate with someone who has died, such as the baby's room. Death may seem like an enemy they can try to avoid or beat.

Children of this age may still develop theories that are not based on fact about why the baby died. And because the conscience develops at this age, they may feel responsible. Your children are also better able to sympathize with you, now. But because they are so young, they may misjudge what they think you need. They may not talk about the baby or their own feelings for fear it would make you sad. This protective burden can feel overwhelming to a young child.

Ages 10-12

Some false ideas about why death happens, and feelings of responsibility, still linger in this age range. Older children may reflect more on how the death of the baby will affect the family as well as them personally. They may have strong ideas about memorial rituals for the baby. These children may be critical of the way family and friends react to your baby's death. However, they can also be very sensitive to others' needs.

Teens

Your teenager will be capable of an adult understanding of death. But because they are very new to adult behavior, they may be unsure of how to respond to the death of the baby. Adolescents may also be more interested in the biological details of the baby's death and may have very strong feelings about the unfairness of death. It is normal for children to grow apart from you at this age. They may not have peers who have experienced this type of grief. It would be most helpful if someone *listened* to them rather than offer solutions.



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Teenage Grief: Death and the Adolescent

Adolescence is perhaps one of the most difficult and confusing stages in life. It is a time of major transition and subtle loss, as the teenager says goodbye to childhood and the assumed security that it represents. Emotions often ride a roller coaster of intensity and the ego is hard at work in establishing a new identity. Consequently, the teenager is extremely vulnerable to stress. Add to this the loss of a loved one and frequently you will find a teen who is frightened, confused and isolated... isolated because there are few places a teenager can go for help.

Many people, because of the pain involved and lack of understanding, do not know what to do or say to the teenager who is grieving. Thus they say and do very little. It is often assumed that because the teenager is young he or she will roll with the punches and come out of the experience relatively unscathed. This is dangerous thinking. If there is no support and closure for the adolescent, unresolved grief may resurface as new losses are experienced. Unhealthy behavior patterns and physical symptoms of distress may develop.

The needs of the teenager are unique. Listed below are some of the more typical ones.

- Adults often assume the teenager doesn't need or desire outward signs of affection at his/her age (hugs, kisses, etc.). Beware of that assumption. Ask instead. In most cases the need is there, especially during this time of loss, and it may be extremely difficult for the child to ask for that kind of physical support.
- Teenagers need to share in the family's grief process. Parents and others who try to protect the teenager by putting on a front or by avoiding the subject may create an atmosphere of isolation and confusion. The child may assume others didn't really love the deceased. They may also assume, because others don't appear to be grieving, that their grief is out of proportion and unhealthy. This can be very frightening!
- It is important that the teenager be invited to take part in the planning of the funeral and/or memorial service if one is planned. It is a statement to the child that his or her loss is recognized while affording the opportunity to actively begin the grieving process in a visible fashion.
- Because the experience of emotional pain can be exhausting for both the child and his/her family, it's easy to let daily routines fall by the wayside. Established forms of discipline may also change simply because it takes too much energy to stand firm, even in areas that are very important. This kind of inconsistency is very natural in the early days following the death, but the re-establishment of routines and discipline are important in providing a needed sense of security in the home.
- Much of the adolescent's time is spent in school/classroom and can be an extremely lonely place. Unrealistic pressure to perform can be put on the student, if the teachers are unaware of the loss. Always contact the school as soon after the death as possible.

There may be times when the child simply cannot cope with the classroom environment. With knowledge of the loss, the teacher can tactfully excuse the child and hopefully provide some needed privacy and personal support.

- Identity with the opposite sex is very important at this stage of life. With other members of the family wrapped in the pain of their own loss, the teenager desperately needs to “belong” to someone. Many teenagers say it really doesn’t matter if the relationship is even a good one... they just need to make the statement to the world and to themselves that someone else cares for them in an intimate way. If there has been a break-up in a boy-girl relationship prior to the death, the sense of loss can be even more profound.
- When anyone of us is in pain, relief is generally sought. The teenager’s world is inundated with pressures to indulge in drugs and alcohol. This temporary means of escape may be more attractive than ever at this time. Be open with the teenager. Let him/her know you understand the attraction and talk about other methods of coping.

Questions Frequently Asked by the Teenager:

- Did I do or say something that helped promote the death?
- What if someone else in the family dies too?
- Will I die of the same illness? When?
- How can I help the pain of others in my family when my pain is so great?
- Who will take care of me?
- How can I go to school and hold myself together?
- My friends keep telling me to snap out of it and my parents cry a lot. Who can I talk to?
- I caught myself laughing today and now I feel guilty. Does this mean I’m bad and have no feelings?
- I loved (deceased). Why am I angry with him/her?
- If everybody’s going to die anyway, what’s the use of living?

Remember, even though the teenager is striving for independence, he or she still needs you. Grieving does not rely on one’s ability to understand but on the ability to feel. We don’t like to experience frightening feelings alone. Your presence and the expression of your own honest feelings can be an invaluable gift to the grieving adolescent. Be real! These children don’t need a performance: they need an act of love.