

Different Ways Children Express Grief

- ♥ Apparent lack of feelings
- ♥ Physiological changes
- ♥ Regressive behavior
- ♥ “Big Man” or “Big Woman” syndrome
- ♥ Disorganization and panic
- ♥ Explosive emotions
- ♥ Acting-out behavior
- ♥ Fear
- ♥ Guilt and self-blame
- ♥ Relief
- ♥ Loss and loneliness
- ♥ Reconciliation

These are NATURAL ways that children experience and express their grief. This list is not all-inclusive or mutually exclusive. These grief responses occur in no specific order or progression. They may occur near the time of the death or many weeks, months, or even years later. Each child’s responses are uniquely different and right for them.

How adults respond to death has a major effect on the way children react to the death. Sometimes parents/adults don’t want to talk about the death. They assume this will spare the children some of the pain and sadness. The reality, however, is that children will grieve anyway. To help them through grief, parents need to establish a relationship in which the death is talked about openly. Children need to understand that grief is a natural feeling when someone they love has died.

Children also need confirmation from adults that it’s alright to be sad and cry, and that the hurt they feel now won’t last forever. When ignored, children may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief.

The first step in establishing a helping-healing relationship is to LISTEN carefully to what children are saying. Allow them to do the teaching/leading. Adults, on the other hand, provide support, love and understanding.

As children express their feelings about the death, adults need to respond with sensitivity and warmth. Be aware of your tone of voice. Be sure to maintain eye contact. What is communicated without words can be just as meaningful to children as what is actually said. Let children know their feelings will be accepted and that they will not be judged or criticized during this stressful time.

Time and again, during our work at SandCastles, we hear from adults and children of all ages that they do not wish to be told how to grieve, what they should or should not do, and especially when they should be “over it” and “go on with their lives.”

A Child’s View of Grief, Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.