

Grief and Death



How to support your preschooler (ages 3 to 5 years)

Grief understanding and reactions

Children of this age often connect events that are unrelated. For example, if Grandpa has a headache and died, a child may fear that mommy is going to die because she has a headache.

They may also think they caused the death by their thoughts, words or actions. Death may also cause a child to have feelings of insecurity. A child may fear being separated from those close to him.

Preschoolers' language and expressions are limited. During stressful times you may see a child change his behavior, such as:

- Clinging
- Whining
- Hyperactivity
- Withdrawal
- Aggressiveness
- Anger

Preschoolers view death as passing. The concept of forever is beyond their understanding, and they may believe the dead person will return.

How adults can help

Use simple, truthful statements, such as John died last night. When someone dies his body stops working. His body will never work again. This means John will no longer play or eat dinner with us.

Tell the child that the death is not their fault. Explain that they did not cause the death to happen by thinking or saying anything about the deceased person.

Realize that regressive behaviors or changes in behavior are common with childhood grief. They will normally pass as the child progresses in the grieving process. Be patient and supportive during these times. Maintain daily routines when possible to increase their sense of security.

Preschoolers need to hear reassuring words, such as our family is going to be OK, but we are very sad right now because we miss Jane so much.