

# **Supporting Grieving Kids & Teens: A Conversation for Parents and Guardians.**

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**March 4, 2021**



# Basic Premises of Grief

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- Grief is a normal reaction to any loss (people, places and things).
- Grief is unique to each person, and is a life-long process.
- Grief does not progress in an orderly or predictable manner.
- Every person has the capacity to heal, given an emotionally safe environment .

# Characteristics of Children's Greif

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- Children cannot comprehend that death is final, universal, and irreversible until age 8 or 9 because of their cognitive development
- Children have a short sadness span, and therefore have a limited ability to tolerate emotional pain
- Children have a limited ability to verbalize their feelings
- Children do not like to be different from their peers; bereavement makes them different

# Characteristics of Children's Greif

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- Children will need to revisit their grief developmentally
- Children have limited coping skills
- Children look to adults to model appropriate grief expression
- Children are likely to blame themselves

# Birth–2 years

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- Reacts to loss of primary care-giver
- Sensitive to feelings of care-givers
- Expect changes in sleeping, eating, fussiness, etc.

# 2-5 years old

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- Limited awareness of death
- Believe death is reversible
- Won't happen to them
- Magical Thinking
  - Exacerbated by lack of information
- Need repetition to process information
- Fear of abandonment

# 6-8 years old

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- Greater cognitive understanding
- Death is final
- Limited coping skills
- May not show grief outwardly
- Does not want to be different
- Magical thinking
- Regression
- Guilt, anger, fear, health concerns

# 9-12 years old

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- More realistic understanding of death (final, inevitable)
- Less spontaneous demonstration of feelings
- Does not want to be different
- Attempting to master fears
  - Focus on morbid / scary details
- Expect to see
  - Anger, irritability, fearfulness, phobic behavior, hypochondria



# 13-18 years old

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- Striving for independence
  - Don't want to ask for help
- Threatened by feelings of dependence, regression
- Risk taking behavior
  - Sense of invulnerability
- Mature cognitive understanding of death
  - Death is final, universal, inevitable
- Spiritual questioning

# How to help

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- Be present and authentic
- Listen more, talk less
- Avoid trying to “cheer up” or “fix” the person
- Allow emotional expression
- Show empathy

# How to help

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- Be as honest as possible. Tell the truth, even when it's hard. Don't be afraid to bring "it" up
- Use simple, concrete, age appropriate language.
- Keep it simple at first. Giving too much information or too many details can be overwhelming.
- "Layer" information- add more details over time.
- Invite questions- anytime.

# Ways to Help

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- Give choices – create a safe space to go
- Maintain rules/ boundaries while providing an outlet for expression
- Encourage child to play and have fun (projective play)
- Sensitivity around important days – plans for anniversary, birthday, holidays, Mother's/ Father's day, etc.

# When more help may be needed

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- Continued problems at school or work
- Difficulty participating in regular daily activities
- Increased aggressiveness or ongoing angry outbursts
- Excessive guilt
- Depression
- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Risk taking behaviors
- Suicidal thoughts

# Referral information

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Call Ele's Place at (734) 929- 6640.

**Note-** We are not a crisis center. Our practice is to return family and program calls within one business day.

Families seeking support will need to contact us directly.

Professionals & community members are invited to call for information/ consultation.

[www.elesplace.org](http://www.elesplace.org)