

Facts and Misconceptions about Children and Grief

Misconceptions

They don't understand what has happened; they're too young

Going to the funeral would just upset them.

I must protect them from loss and pain.

Children don't feel grief the same as adults.

When they have grieved once, it should be over.

I won't say or do the right thing; I must be in control to talk to them.

They won't want to talk about it.

I might upset them.

They need to keep busy.

Getting rid of reminders helps; encourage only good memories.

I won't mention it unless they do.

Once they've been angry or guilty that should be the end of it.

Facts

Even the very young know when those around them are upset. Most understand more than adults realize.

Not being included in family rituals could be more upsetting. It helps to see adults grieve.

All children do experiences losses and need help in learning ways to deal with them.

Everyone grieves in their own way, depending on the circumstances, developmental level, and life experience. This is usual, valid, and healthy.

As they develop, children must re-grieve in light of their new developmental understanding and abilities.

There are no right answers, only honest ones. Saying something acknowledges their grief, dispels fears and misunderstandings.

Let that be their choice, not yours. That's often all they want to talk about.

They're already upset; this is a natural part of grieving.

Routine activities are important, but new activities may be confusing. Not thinking about it delays the grief.

This suggests it's wrong to think of the person who died or to have bad memories.

This suggests it is not all right to mention the person; that there is something bad about their death; that you don't care.

Grief is a process, not steps. Feelings will surface repeatedly, as each aspect of the loss is realized.

Misconceptions

It is morbid to want to touch and talk about the body.

Use terms like "passed away" or "gone to heaven."

If they are not expressing grief, children aren't grieving.

I should tell them all the facts immediately.

Facts

This is normal for children. It is a good way to say goodbye and make the death seem real.

These are misleading and will confuse and frighten children. "Dead" is clearer and better.

They may not know how to express feelings or know they have permission to grieve. They may delay grief to avoid upsetting others.

They may not be able to understand all aspects of the death or handle the intensity of the situation right away.

Source: *Medical Care of the Dying*,
2nd edition, Victoria Hospice Society,
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, 1993.