

WHAT IS NORMAL?

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSES TO GRIEF

Although grief is a unique and personal experience, some aspects of grief are affected by age and development. Elementary-aged children will grieve differently than very young children, teens, or adults, and need different expectations and supports to help them manage their grief in healthy ways.

UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH:

Children this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent (this concept is typically grasped between ages 5 and 7), but may still sometimes entertain the idea that death is reversible. They often exhibit magical thinking, believing that something they thought, did, or did not do, caused or contributed to the death. Children in this age group also begin to generalize the concept of death as they come to understand that death is a universal part of life. They are likely to worry about their own death or the deaths of other people in their lives. They may also focus on the details of what happened to the person who died, or to their body after they died.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- **Frequent, sometimes repetitive questions**
Elementary kids are likely to have many questions about what happened to their person, how and why it happened, and if anything will happen to other people in their life or to them. They may ask about rituals, what happens to the body, or what the person is doing now or where they are.
- **Increased anxiety and concerns about safety**
Once a child recognizes that it is possible that another person can die, especially a parent or caregiver, they are likely to generalize this knowledge. They may be concerned that the same thing will happen to others, that they will not be cared for, or generally feel that the world is an unsafe place.
- **Intense reactions that vary in length**
As attention spans lengthen throughout elementary school, kids may have short periods of very intense emotional reactivity, or longer periods of emotional expression. They are likely to show high reactivity at some times and lower reactivity other times, sometimes without clear reasons. They may experience sudden or strong reminders of the person who died that they struggle to understand or verbalize. They are likely to experience a wide range of emotions such as sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, etc.



WHAT TO EXPECT: (cont'd)

- **Physical responses to stress**

Elementary kids may have difficulty falling asleep, have nightmares, or require more soothing than they did prior to the death. They often express discomfort physically, complaining of stomach aches, headaches, or have a significant change in appetite. They may show regression of skills they recently gained or act helpless at times when they would previously insist on independence.

- **Expressing thoughts or emotions through play/expressive activities**

Elementary kids are unlikely to sit down and have a lengthy conversation about their emotions, but will show them through play, art, music, or other less verbal forms of self-expression. These expressions may be repetitive. Sometimes they will be specifically about the death/event, and at other times the connections will be less obvious.

