

WHAT IS NORMAL?

PRESCHOOL DEVELOPMENTAL RESPONSES TO GRIEF

Although grief is a unique and personal experience, some aspects of grief are affected by age and development. Young children will grieve differently than older 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 have limited understanding of death and often do not understand that death is permanent. They might hear that a person is dead, then ask when that person is coming home, or if they will be at a family event. They may ask questions about where the person is now. Preschoolers often need to hear information about what death means many times and may seem to forget what they have heard before. They may also repeat what they are told, sometimes without context.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- **Intense, intermittent, often short reactions**

Because preschoolers have short attention spans (approximately 5-10 minutes), their reactions to loss are likely to be brief as well. However, these reactions will happen many times over, sometimes because of reminders of the person or their death, and sometimes randomly. They may melt down quickly and recover more quickly than people of other ages.

- **Physical responses to stress**

Preschoolers may have trouble sleeping, show changes in appetite (not wanting to eat or eating when not hungry), be more clingy than usual, or seem to lose skills they recently gained, such as potty training or sleeping alone. They might also complain more about discomfort, such as stomach aches or headaches.

- **Emotion expressed through behavior**

Preschoolers are likely to play or otherwise act out their sadness, anger, and other strong emotions rather than talking.

- **Increased strong emotions**

Preschoolers are often more irritable or clingy, cry more easily, or throw more tantrums. They may also show more separation anxiety.

- **Telling the story**

Preschoolers often talk about whatever comes to their minds, including death and family changes. They may repeat information they have been told, bring it up randomly, or tell strangers or acquaintances about the death.