



GRIEF SERVICES

Understanding Grief Reactions of Preschoolers: Ages 3-5 years old

Children of this age have been exposed to and understand the physical aspect of death of plants, insects, and animals, but they generally perceive death as temporary. This age child still believes illness and death to be reversible so be prepared to answer the same questions several times with short explanations. Patience will be needed, as it takes time and additional maturity or experience for this realization to become part of their understanding.

Preschoolers are not able to tolerate “sadness spans” and will take frequent opportunities to play. Do not be surprised at their indifference or if they do not ask any questions. Give them choices and time to absorb and process what they are able, and then to choose how to participate.

Explain the death of their loved one using brief and factual concrete language. Since their perception of “died” is less alive help them distinguish between life and death by being honest and correctly using the terms about dying. Explain that when people die, “their bodies stop working” so they do not breathe, eat, talk, think or feel anymore.

The most painful thing about death to this age is the concept of separation and abandonment, which can cause the avoidance or need to be distant. Someone they depend on has gone away. They may be angry or resentful at the person who died; or unable to show it and then they can become sullen or withdrawn. Offer support and comfort through physical presence, verbal reassurance and consistent representation of their safety and importance in your life.