

# KERN COUNTY CEMETERY DISTRICT NO. 1

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## Grief and Children

**'Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by a change or an end in a familiar pattern of behavior.'** John James and Russell Friedman in *When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal With Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses*

Children's experience of grief varies depending on the type of loss and the developmental stage of the child. Moving to a new town may precipitate a grief response that is mild and transient, while grief from loss of a parent threatens the foundation of the child's world. Young children express grief in vastly different ways from teens and adults. A child's grief is complicated because it is linear, circular, and developmental.

**The Stages of Children's Grief Disorganization** - The initial expressions of grief in children range from regression, temper tantrums, and exaggerated fears in younger children to physical symptoms, lack of concentration, and mood swings in older children. The disorganization of early grief is a true crisis for children, but parents and loved ones can help the child through this stage.

**Transition** - Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair follow the stress and chaotic behaviors of the disorganization stage. Many children will exhibit true depression. More common are symptoms of withdrawal, aggression, and giving up in school.

**Reorganization** - When painful feelings are expressed their emotional energy wanes, and detachment becomes possible. During this stage children have more energy and motivation for moving forward to a positive resolution of their grief. Though children's grief follows this progression, it is complicated by the circular nature of grief. If you've experienced grief in your life, you know this to be true. Just when you have moved forward in your resolution of grief, a reminder of the loss floods you with emotions that bring you right back to feelings of despair and great sorrow. Adults can recognize and understand what is happening with their emotions; children often cannot. Parents must recognize the circular nature of grieving to help their child through difficult times during their development. The final consideration in helping children live through grief is the developmental stage of the child. It's important to note that a grieving child's developmental

stage may lag behind his chronological age. Regression is expected and developmental accomplishments take longer to achieve. Learn how children at different developmental stages express grief and how you can help them at each stage:

## How Preschoolers Express Grief and Ways You Can Help

### How Preschoolers Express Grief

- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Clinging to adults
- Exaggerated fears
- Excessive crying
- Temper tantrums
- Regression
- Stubbornness

### Helping the Grieving Preschooler

- Answer the child's question honestly and simply; allow them to talk about the loss; help them share their fears and worries.
- Provide simple routines.
- Give the child affection and nurturing; attempt to connect with them.
- Provide more opportunities for play.
- Be patient with regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking.
- Provide opportunities for the expression of painful emotions through play, creative outlets, and talk. Teach them to recognize and name their full range of feelings.

## How Elementary School-Age Children Express Grief and Ways You Can Help

### How Elementary School-Age Children Express Grief

- School and learning problems
- Preoccupation with the loss and related worries; daydreaming; trouble paying attention
- Bedwetting; regression; developmental delays
- Eating and sleeping problems (overeating, refusing to eat, nightmares, sleepiness)
- Fighting, anger

### Helping the Grieving Elementary School-Age Child

- Keep tasks simple. Explain things before they experience them - new neighborhood, school, church, family routines, and changes.
- Provide a structured environment that is predictable and consistent; limit choices; introduce small, manageable choices over time.
- Contain acting out behavior; insist that children express their wants, needs, and feelings with words, not by acting out.
- Encourage them to let you know when they are worried or having a difficult time.

## How Pre-Teens and Early Adolescents Express Grief and Ways You Can Help

### How Pre-Teens and Early Adolescents Express Grief

- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping and eating disorders, hypochondria) Wide mood swings
- Able to verbally expresses emotions
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors
- Anger; aggression; fighting; oppositional behavior
- Withdrawal from adults
- Depression; sadness
- Lack of concentration and attention
- Identity confusion; testing limits

### Helping the Grieving Pre-Teen and Early Adolescent

- Accept that they will experience mood swings and physical symptoms.
- Encourage them to honestly recognize their painful feelings and find positive outlets in physical and creative activities.
- Listen for the feelings behind their words and actions and respond with empathy.
- Be truthful and factual in explaining the loss.
- Help them develop and maintain their sense of identity.
- Allow preteens to make choices that are not harmful. Encourage safe expressions and experiences of beginning independence.