

Helping Infants and Toddlers Cope with Grief

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When Someone a Baby Loves Dies

When someone a baby loves dies, knowing what to say or do can be difficult. How do you tell a toddler that his favorite grandpa is dead? What do you do when a baby whose mother has died cries all the time and refuses to eat? Indeed, young children constitute a very special group of mourners. This article discusses some of their unique needs and will help you care for bereaved infants and toddlers up to age three.

Yes, Even Babies Grieve

Many adults think that because very young children are not completely aware of what is going on around them, they are not impacted by death. We must dispel this myth. I say it simply: Any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn.

True, infants and toddlers are not developmentally mature enough to fully understand the concept of death. In fact, many children do not truly understand the inevitability and permanence of death until adolescence.

But understanding death and being affected by it are two very different things. When a primary caregiver dies, even tiny babies notice and react to the loss. They might not know exactly what happened and why, but they do know that someone important is now missing from their small worlds.

Yes, even babies grieve. And when someone they love dies, children of all ages need our time and attention if they are to heal and grow to be emotionally healthy adults.

The Special Needs of Bereaved Infants

As anyone who has been around infants knows, babies quickly bond with their mothers or other primary caregivers. In fact, studies have shown that babies just hours old recognize and respond to their mothers' voices. Many psychologists even believe that babies think they and their mothers are one and the same person for a number of months.

This powerful and exclusive attachment to mommy and daddy continues through most of the first year of life. When a parent dies, then, there is no question the baby notices that something is missing. She will likely protest her loss by crying more than usual, sleeping more or less than she did before or changing her eating patterns.

Offer Comfort.

When they are upset, most infants are soothed by physical contact. Pick up the bereaved infant when he cries. Wear him in a front pack; he will be calmed by your heartbeat and motion. Give him a gentle baby massage. Talk to him and smile at him as much as possible.

And do not worry about spoiling him. The more you hold him, rock him and sing to him, the more readily he will realize that though things have changed, someone will always be there to take care of him.

Take Care of Basic Needs.

Besides lots of love, an infant needs to be fed, sheltered, diapered and bathed. Try to maintain the bereaved baby's former schedule. But don't be surprised if she sleeps or eats more or less than usual. Such changes are her way of showing her grief. If she starts waking up several times a night, soothe her back to sleep. If she doesn't want to eat as much for now, that's OK, too.

The most important thing you can do is to meet her needs-whatever they seem to be-quickly and lovingly in the weeks and months to come.

The Special Needs of Bereaved Toddlers

Like infants, bereaved toddlers mostly need our love and attention. They also need us to help them understand that though it is painful, grief is the price we pay for the priceless chance to love others. They need us to teach them that death is a normal and natural part of life.

Offer Comfort and Care

The bereaved toddler needs one-on-one care 24 hours a day. Make sure someone she loves and trusts is always there to feed her, clothe her, diaper her and play with her. Unless she is already comfortable with a certain provider, now is not the time to put her in daycare. Expect regressive behaviors from bereaved toddlers. Those who slept well before may now wake up during the night. Independent children may now be afraid to leave their parents' side. Formerly potty-trained kids may need diapers again. All of these behaviors are normal grief responses. They are the toddler's way of saying, "I'm upset by this death and I need to be taken care of right now." By tending to her baby-like needs, you will be letting her know that she will be taken care of and that she is loved without condition.

Model Your Own Grief

Toddlers learn by imitation. If you grieve in healthy ways, toddlers will learn to do the same. Don't hide your feelings when you're around children. Instead, share them. Cry if you want to. Be angry if you want to. Let the toddler know that these painful feelings are not directed at him and are not his fault, however. Sometimes you may feel so overwhelmed by your own grief that you can't make yourself emotionally available to the bereaved toddler. You needn't feel guilty about this; it's OK to need some "alone time" to mourn. In fact, the more fully you allow yourself to do your own work of mourning, the sooner you'll be available to help the child. In the meantime, make sure other caring adults are around to nurture the bereaved toddler.

Use Simple, Concrete Language

When someone a toddler loves dies, he will know that person is missing. He may ask for Mommy or Uncle Ted one hundred times a day. I recommend using the word "dead" in response to his queries. Say, "Mommy is dead, honey. She can never come back." Though he won't yet know what "dead" means, he will begin to differentiate it from "bye-bye" or "gone" or "sleeping"-terms that only confuse the issue. Tell him that dead means the body stops working. The person can't walk or talk anymore, can't breathe and can't eat. And while using simple, concrete language is important, remember that more than two-thirds of your support will be conveyed nonverbally.

Keep Change to a Minimum

All toddlers need structure, but bereaved toddlers, especially, need their daily routines. Keeping mealtimes, bedtime and bathtime the same lets them know that their life continues and that they will always be cared for. And try not to implement other changes right away. Now is not the time to go from a crib to a bed, to potty train or to wean from a bottle.

Allow Them To Participate

Since the funeral is a significant event, children-no matter how young-should have the same opportunity to attend as any other member of the family. Encourage, but never force. Explain the purpose of the funeral to toddlers: a time to be happy about our love for Grandma, a time to be sad that she is gone, a time to say goodbye.

When they choose to, young children can participate in the funeral by lighting a candle or placing a memento or photo in the casket.

For toddlers, viewing the body of the person who died can also be a positive experience. It provides an opportunity for you to show them what death looks like. Explain that the person is not sleeping, but has stopped breathing and functioning altogether. As with attending the funeral, however, seeing the body should not be forced.

While taking an infant or toddler to the funeral may seem unimportant now, think what that inclusion will mean to her later. As a teenager and adult, she will feel good knowing that instead of being home with a babysitter, she was included in this meaningful ritual.

Help Infants and Toddlers "Remember"

Very few of us remember things that happened before we were four or five years old. So though he may have one or two vague and fleeting memories from this time period, it is unlikely the bereaved infant or toddler will clearly remember the person who died.

But when they get older, bereaved children will naturally be curious about this important person they never had a chance to know. Was Grandma nice? What did Daddy look like?

You can help answer these questions by putting together a "memory box" for the bereaved child. Collect mementos and photos that might later be special to the child. Write down memories, especially those that capture the relationship between the person who died and the infant or toddler. If you have videotape footage of the deceased, place a copy in the memory box for safekeeping.

During my many years as a bereavement counselor, I have learned that remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. You have the opportunity to help link the bereaved young child's past and future.

Be Aware of Attachment Disorders

A few bereaved infants and toddlers, typically those who do not receive sufficient love and attention after the death of a significant person in their lives, go on to develop what is called an "attachment disorder." Children who experience multiple losses are also at risk.

Basically, young children with attachment disorders learn not to trust or love. When a child's primary caregiver dies, for example, the child may unconsciously decide that this kind of separation is too painful. So to prevent it from happening again, he "detaches" himself emotionally from those around him.

How do you know if a child is "detached?" Usually it is obvious that something is wrong. Among the symptoms are a lack of ability to give and receive affection, cruelty to others or to pets, speech disorders, extreme control problems and abnormalities in eye contact. Accurate diagnoses can only be made by mental health professionals with training in this area. And while we don't yet know all there is to know about attachment disorders, we do know that if a child has become detached it is important to seek help as early as possible. The older the child becomes, the more difficult it is to help him attach to others in healthy ways.

Final Thoughts

Remember, any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn. And infants and toddlers are certainly capable of loving. As caring adults, we have a responsibility to help them during this difficult time. With our love and attention, they will learn to understand their loss and grow to be emotionally healthy children, adolescents and adults.