

When Children's Grief Gets Complicated

Since there is no "right" way to grieve, complete with a magic time line, it is sometimes difficult to understand where the behaviors of normal grieving end and those of more complicated issues begin.

Normal grief may range over a variety of reactions including: shortened attention spans, trouble concentrating, not completing school work, headache or stomach ache, impaired judgment, short term memory problems, fatigue, depression, isolation from others, being overly sensitive, class disruption or clowning, hyperactivity, impulsivity, disorganization, difficulty following directions, and sadness.

As a parent or guardian, do not hesitate to use your judgment and knowledge of your child (children) if you feel something is wrong.

"Red Flags" that may indicate complicated mourning:

- Total denial of the reality of the death (or other loss)
- Persistent panic or fear
- School work falls drastically and does not improve over time
- Prolonged physical complaints without medical verification
- Chronic hostility, acting-out towards others or self
- Prolonged changes in typical behavior patterns or personality
- Consistent withdrawal from friends and family members
- Dramatic, ongoing changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Drug or alcohol abuse in older children
- Suicidal thoughts or actions

Depression and grief are often confused. Children who suffer from clinical depression:

- Are unable to respond to comfort and support
- Are unwilling to respond to play situations
- Are unable to directly express anger about the loss
- Are unable to relate their feelings to any life event, even the loss
- Are unable to experience moments of joy
- Project a sense of hopelessness and chronic emptiness
- Express chronic physical complaints

- Often express generalized feelings of guilt (not specific to the loss)
- Have a deep loss of self-esteem

If you notice any of these indicators here are some things you can do:

- Consult with a grief counselor for support, ideas and suggestions. It always helps to talk over your concerns with someone, and this is a great place to begin.
- See if school personnel are observing similar behaviors. Consider an appointment with the pediatrician or family doctor.
- Have the school nurse or social worker assess how the child is doing with the loss.
- At the middle/high school level, share your concerns with the school counselor and ask that person to become involved.
- Encourage your child to seek counseling or join a grief support group, whether through the school or a community based agency. If he/she is reluctant, try saying something like, "I think it would help. The painful feelings you have about the loss are just as real as the pain you experience when you fall off your bike. Just like there are doctors and nurses to help you with a broken arm, there are people who can help you with the pain of your grief."
- If your child refuses to get help, ask the school counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker to intervene. They are trained to know what to do next.

While not all children experience loss in the same way, all losses must be mourned. This is an ongoing process with no easy answers. We need to be mindful that children carry experiences of loss into adult life, and that grieving is automatic, natural and lifelong. Learning appropriate coping mechanisms helps throughout life.