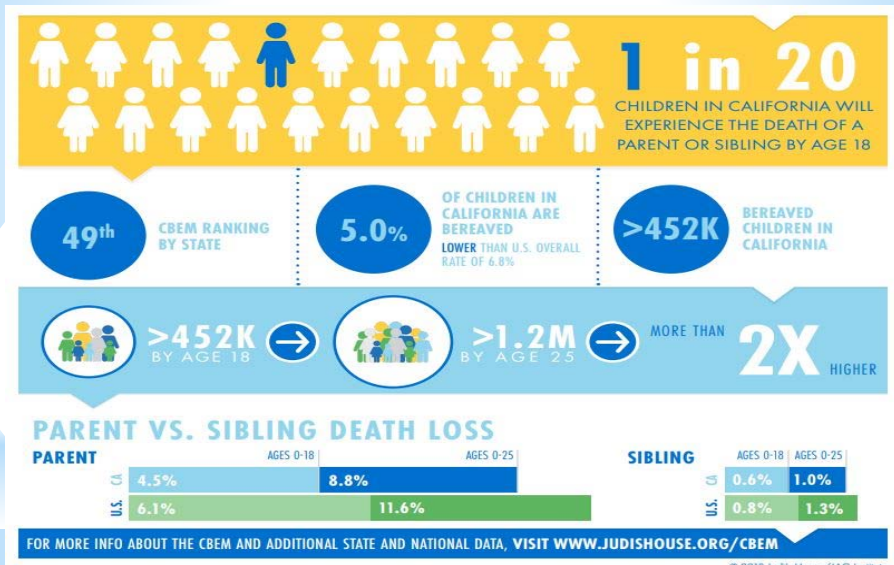


When Infants and Toddlers Grieve: Understanding and Supporting Young Children After a Death

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Prevalence



Pre-Bereavement

- Provide honest information with simple explanations
 - Name the illness
 - Explain the difference between a life threatening illness and a curable illness
 - Discuss if it is contagious or not
 - Explain that it wasn't due to anything they thought or did
 - Assure them that medical professionals are working hard to help
 - **Revisit** their understanding of illness **often** and answer questions as they arise

For example: "Joey, please come to the living room, we have some sad news to share with you. We want to let you know that daddy has a serious sickness called cancer. Cancer isn't something that you or I can catch from daddy and daddy didn't get it from anything we did or said. The plan is to have the doctors at the hospital help daddy to fight the cancer. He will be there a lot for appointments. Joey it is important for you to know that daddy will have good days where he looks okay and bad days when he looks really tired and sick. We love you and you are safe. We will tell you more as we learn more about it. Do you have any questions right now? We want you to come to us with any questions or if you feel sad/worried and want to talk."

Pre-Bereavement

- Create a sense of safety
 - Maintain schedules and routines
 - Invite family and friends to assist with this
- Set limits and boundaries
 - Children still need rules and consequences
- Provide extra nurturing and support
 - Try to give them one on one time away from the house
 - You can check in then but also check out and have normal non patient related conversations
 - Ask them who they want to know- encourage telling the school and friends
- Allow them to decide how involved they want to be
 - Children often want to be included, provide simple tasks that they can be in charge of

For example, “Joey, daddy is going to need help sometimes with things like bringing him drinks, food, blankets and pillows, bringing him the phone or remote, putting socks on, and rubbing lotion on his legs and arms. Would like to help with any of those things? If you ever want to stop or start helping it is important that you let me know. You wont get in trouble if you decide you don't want to help. I'll check in on you and make sure you are ok with these helper duties. Even though daddy has cancer, we are going to still keep your bedtime, your after school program and you still have to help out with picking up your toys, getting yourself dressed, brushing your teeth, and putting your food dishes in the sink. Our house rules will stay the same until we tell they are going to change. Do you have any questions? Would it be helpful to draw this out?”

Pre-Bereavement

- Normalize grief responses
 - Crying
 - Anxiety
 - Stress
 - Irritableness/grumpy
 - Regressions
- Talk about how everyone's response will be different
 - No need to worry or hide emotions
- Prepare them for what they can expect
 - See, hear, smell, and touch
 - Loss of strength, appetite, vocalization, personality
 - Pain
 - Breathing changes

For example: "Joey, we need to talk about our feelings and ways we can get our BIG feelings out safely. Daddy having cancer can make us all have different feelings. Can I share some of my feelings with you and how I get them out? Sometimes I feel really sad, when I am sad you might see me talk about it or cry. Sometimes I get mad, you might see me yell, make a lot of noise, clean or go to my room to take a break. Sometimes I feel scared, you might see me hug on daddy, or want to hug you. You might hear me asking lots of questions and looking worried. Sometimes I feel happy, you might see me smiling and laughing. You might share these feelings and you might have different ones. All of our feelings are ok. We don't have to hide our feelings. If you aren't sure how to get your feelings out in a safe way, come talk to me and I will help you. Joey, it is important for you know that we will all have different feelings at different times. This is ok. Do you want to share with me some of your feelings right now?"



Death Notification

- Find a safe neutral setting to deliver the news
- Use age appropriate language
- Have their favorite adults present
- Get down at eye level with them
- Prepare for an array of emotions and responses
- Provide activities and opportunities to digest the news
- The 4 C's: Cause, Catch, Cure, and Care

For example: "Joey, can you please come to the living room we have some sad news to share with you. Today, your daddy died, which means that his body stopped working. The doctors and daddy tried really hard to fight the cancer but the cancer was too strong and it made your daddy's body stop working. **(Take a breath, check the pulse)**

When someone dies we don't get to see them anymore. This means that their heart stopped working, their lungs stopped working and their brain stopped working. They can no longer eat, breathe, talk, move, grow, hear, or feel anything. **(Take a breath, check the pulse)**

This can make us really sad, upset, mad, worried, scared and a bunch of other feelings. It is ok to cry, and have a bunch of feelings. Remember that there isn't anything you did to make this happen. I want to tell you that we love you and you are safe. **(Take a breath, check the pulse)**

If you want you can go draw, play, get hugs and kisses, eat, or talk. Do you have any questions right now? What do you want to do right now?"

Rituals Post Death

- Allow them to spend time with the body
- Explain that they can still touch and talk to the body
- Model for them
- Address what the next few weeks might look like
 - Where the body goes
 - Funeral planning (include them)

Rituals Post Death

- **Wake/Viewing**
 - Show the entire body to younger children
 - Allow them to explore the body
- **Funeral**
 - Assign each child a buddy
 - Allow them to get creative (draw on coffin, leave gifts)
- **Burial**
 - Explain what happens to the body
 - Let them watch the casket being lowered
 - Remind young children that the body is no longer alive
- **Cremation**
 - It is ok to tell children about it
 - Share with them what your plan is (keep or let go)

For example: Talking to Joey about Cremation

“The body can no longer feel anything when it is dead. Cremation is when the body is placed in a room that heats up to a high temperature and after a few hours the body is transformed into ashes. We keep the ashes in a special box.”

Childhood Bereavement

- Less verbal and more observable (action-oriented)
- They grieve through play
- They need creative outlets
- It won't look like your grief
- It is most likely a normal grief response (limited life exposure)
- Limited death databank
- Cyclical in nature

0-2 Developmental Responses

- **Concept of death**
 - Can sense that something is different at home
 - Does not yet understand what death is but does grasp "goneness"
 - Probably won't remember the person who died
- **Reactions**
 - Fussiness, crying
 - Inconsistent eating and digestion
 - Clinging to adults
 - Regressive behavior
- **What helps**
 - Non-verbal care (such as hugs and rocking)
 - Stable routine
 - Identifying another attachment figure

2-5 Developmental Responses

- **Concept of death**

- Sees death as reversible & temporary – believes person will return
- Doesn't understand that death permanent and universal
- Usually can't comprehend the concepts of heaven, afterlife or soul/spirit
- May not remember the person who died or quickly forget them

- **Reactions**

- Grief spurts
- Regression (bed wetting, thumb sucking)
- Fear of separation
- Nightmares
- Aggression/ irritability
- Non-compliance
- Crying
- Anxiety
- Temper Tantrums
- Telling story to anyone
- Irregular sleep

- **What helps**

- Stable daily routine & structure
- Use the words like "dead" and "died"
- Answer repetitive questions
- Give physical and emotional nurturance
- To be heard and listened to

Common Grief Reactions

Physical

- **Abdominal pains**
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Change in appetite
- **Fatigue**
- **Sleeping problems**
- Restlessness
- **Crying**
- Tightness in the throat (can't swallow)
- **Hyperactive** or under active
- Shaking or trembling
- Weakness or feeling dizzy

Emotional

- **Sadness**
- **Anger**
- Disbelief
- **Fears**
- Relief
- Irritability
- **Guilt**
- **Attachment**
- **Longing**
- Anxiety
- Vulnerability
- Jealousy

Behavioral/Cognitive

- Confusion
- **Searching for loved one**
- Dreaming of loved one
- **Sensing their presence**
- **Retelling story**
- **Dramatic play**
- **Clinging**
- Mood swings
- **Regressive behaviors**
- **Repetitious questioning**
- Hitting/fighting
- **Co-sleeping**

Interventions

- Concept of death
- Processing feelings/emotions
- Somatic symptoms
- Memories
- Continuing Bonds
- Safety
- Coping skills
- Play
- Teach them death related words
- Support & educate the caregivers

Resources

The Elizabeth Hospice- 760-737-2050 www.elizabethhospice.org

Children's Groups (Mission Valley and Escondido)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHKsoSGSGJs>

- Little's Group (3-6)
- Elementary Age Group (6-12)
- Tween Group (11-13)
- Teen Group (13-17)

School Based Group- (17 School Districts)

Centering Corp-Online grief bookstore- www.centering.org

National Alliance for Grieving Children- www.childrengrieve.org

