

# Toddlers and Loss

Children (ages 2 to 5) are not developmentally mature enough to fully understand the concept of death. Their thinking is characterized as magical, egocentric, and casual, and they believe strongly in the power of their wishes, which often leads them to conclude that death is temporary, reversible, or partial. 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.* They might not know exactly what happened and why, but they do know that someone important is now missing from their small worlds. Toddlers and preschoolers may respond to death with periods of anger, sadness, anxiety, and angry outbursts. They are also likely to show regressive behaviors and physical disturbances.

## The Special Needs of Bereaved Toddlers

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 may need one-on-one care 24 hours a day. Make sure someone she loves and trusts is 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 Grandma or a favorite pet one hundred times a day. I recommend using the word "dead" in response to his queries. Say, "Grandma 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"—metaphorical terms that only confuse young children, who may always hold out hope that their loved one will wake up. Be as honest as you can. Children can handle more than we often give them credit for.

Use simple, concrete language. For instance, "Bruiser was very sick and Dr. Jones said he was in a lot of pain, so he gave him a certain medicine that would take the pain away and make his heart stop beating." Or if Bruiser was in an accident: "Bruiser was in the street and a car ran over him. We took him to the vet but it was too late. He died." The child may ask, "Was he in pain?" You can answer, "I don't know," or "Yes he was, but only for an instant," or, "Yes, he was. It was hard for me to see him in so much pain."

If you find children's repeated questions about death disconcerting, keep in mind that it is very common and completely normal for children to ask the same questions over and over again. Children are seeking reassurance and trying to make the information fit their understandings. By going over and over the death of a loved one or pet, the child integrates the experience into their psyche, and achieves understanding and closure. They can also gain a sense of control by discussing their fears.

- ***Keep Change to a Minimum***

All toddlers need structure, but bereaved toddlers, especially, need their daily routines. Keeping mealtimes, bedtime and bath time 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 a 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 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 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 brother 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 toddler.

- ***Final Thoughts***

- Think about and be clear on your religious beliefs and values before you have to answer your child's questions.
- Use the child's own words and slang to phrase your explanations and feed back to them the key words they use when they start revealing their grief to you.
- Remember, everyone grieves differently and according to a different schedule. Be patient.
- If your child does not want to talk about his/her feelings, then you as a parent can share your feelings when it is appropriate.