Navigating Children's Grief

Age	Concepts and Beliefs	Possible emotions	Possible behaviours	How to help
Birth – 2 years	Although infants and toddlers cannot understand death cognitively, they are highly sensitive to attachment disruption and emotional shifts in their environment. Additional concepts they may experience: ○ Awareness that a familiar caregiver is missing ○ Sensitivity to emotional tone in caregivers (distress, crying, tension) ○ Confusion when routines change suddenly ○ Early awareness of separation without understanding cause ○ Strong need for predictability and sensory familiarity ○ Recognition of familiar voices, smells, and touch that are now absent	While infants cannot name emotions, they may express: ○ Distress ○ Separation anxiety ○ Heightened startle response ○ Irritability ○ Emotional dysregulation ○ Increased clinginess ○ Restlessness ○ Loss of a sense of safety ○ Sub / unconscious longing for loved one ○ Sub / unconscious fear of being abandoned	Grief responses often show up as changes in regulation or development: ○ Increased crying or fussiness ○ Sleep disturbances ○ Changes in feeding patterns ○ Regression in developmental milestones ○ Increased need for physical closeness ○ Agitation or restlessness ○ Repetitive rocking or self-soothing behaviours ○ Difficulty settling ○ Reduced exploration of environment ○ May have primitive memories (especially bodily memories)	Support should focus on security, sensory comfort, and consistency: ○ Maintain familiar routines as much as possible ○ Provide frequent physical comfort and soothing ○ Meet immediate physical needs ○ Keep caregivers emotionally available and responsive ○ Use familiar objects such as blankets or toys ○ Speak calmly and gently even though the child may not understand words ○ Maintain stable caregiving relationships ○ Keep environments predictable ○ Ensure the child is surrounded by familiar people whenever possible ○ Caregiver to reach out for practical & emotional support

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3-5 years	Children at this stage are still developing an understanding of permanence and causality. Additional beliefs may include: ○ Thinking death is temporary or reversible ○ Believing the person may return ○ Viewing death as similar to sleep or absence ○ Magical thinking about causing the death through thoughts, wishes, or behaviour ○ Believing death is contagious ○ Confusion between fantasy and reality ○ Thinking death only happens to very old people ○ Believing doctors or adults should be able to fix death	○ Fear of separation ○ Sadness ○ Confusion ○ Anger ○ Jealousy (especially if attention shifts within the family) ○ Anxiety about who will care for them ○ Guilt or self-blame ○ Frustration ○ Insecurity ○ Emotional overwhelm	Children may express grief through play, behaviour, and body symptoms: ○ Regressive behaviours (bedwetting, toileting, thumb sucking) ○ Clinginess ○ Repetitive questioning ○ Re-enactment of illness, death, hospitals, or funerals in play ○ Increased fears (darkness, monsters, separation) ○ Withdrawal or quietness ○ Acting as though the death did not occur ○ Tantrums ○ Sleep disturbances or nightmares ○ Increased need for reassurance ○ Physical complaints (tummy aches, headaches)	○ Use clear, concrete and simple language about death ○ Avoid euphemisms such as “gone to sleep”, or “lost” ○ Repeat explanations as often as needed ○ Encourage symbolic expression through play or creativity ○ Validate feelings without correcting them ○ Offer reassurance about safety and care ○ Maintain routines ○ Manage transitions (home to school / nursery, holidays etc) ○ Provide opportunities to talk about the person who died ○ Read books about loss ○ Involve child in the mourning process ○ Allow participation in mourning rituals if appropriate ○ Support emotional expression through drawing, storytelling, or imaginative play ○ Talk about the person who has died ○ Keep communication open with nursery/school about any changes ○ Adults in family to ensure they have adequate emotional support

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6-9 years	Children increasingly understand the finality of death, though their thinking remains concrete. Additional concepts may include: ○ Curiosity about the physical details of death ○ Concern about how the body changes ○ Worry about their own death or others dying ○ Desire for factual explanations ○ Belief that misbehaviour or thoughts caused the death ○ Developing spiritual or religious interpretations ○ Thinking about the practical consequences of the death Awareness of social differences (e.g., "my family is different now")	○ Sadness ○ Anger ○ Loneliness ○ Anxiety ○ Fear ○ Guilt ○ Embarrassment about their grief ○ Shame ○ Confusion ○ Vulnerability ○ Jealousy of peers with intact families	○ Withdrawal from friends ○ 'Acting out' at home or school ○ Declining concentration ○ Changes in academic performance ○ Increased irritability ○ Aggression or fighting ○ Somatic complaints (headaches, stomach aches) ○ Nightmares ○ Difficulty sleeping ○ Preoccupation with death ○ Protective behaviour toward surviving family members ○ Increased need for reassurance ○ Lack of energy ○ Lack of motivation ○ Struggle concentrate / keep on task	○ Provide factual explanations about death ○ Allow children to ask detailed questions & answer them age appropriately ○ Reassure them they did not cause the death ○ Encourage expression through creative activities ○ Acknowledge their feelings ○ Support peer connection ○ Spend intentional one-to-one time together ○ Encourage memory sharing and / or memory making activities ○ Support physical activity and play ○ Allow the child to decide how much they want to talk ○ Talk about the person who has died ○ Maintain school communication ○ Have a consistent adult at school who can regularly check in with the child ○ Have strategies at school to help them – also being mindful of key dates ○ Help them to re-enter favourite activities / hobbies or try new ones ○ Manage transitions (home to school, holidays etc) ○ Adults in family to ensure they have adequate emotional support

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10-12 years	Children at this stage begin to understand **death more abstractly**. Additional beliefs may include: ○ Awareness that death is **inevitable** ○ Curiosity about **philosophical or spiritual ideas** ○ Concerns about fairness ("Why did this happen?") ○ Worries about the safety of remaining caregivers ○ Awareness of family financial or practical changes ○ Thinking about long-term life events without the deceased ○ Attempting to understand meaning in the loss	○ Sadness ○ Anger ○ Confusion ○ Anxiety ○ Shame ○ Isolation ○ Vulnerability ○ Fear ○ Loneliness ○ Emotional overwhelm ○ Frustration ○ Feeling misunderstood ○ Numbness or seem 'shutdown'	○ Mood swings ○ Withdrawal from family ○ Increased time alone ○ Changes in school engagement ○ Perfectionism or overachievement ○ Aggression ○ Risk-taking experimentation ○ Hiding feelings ○ Increased sensitivity to peer opinions ○ Sleep disturbances	○ Encourage emotional expression in different forms ○ Provide opportunities to talk privately ○ Offer creative outlets such as journaling or art ○ Validate & normalise mixed feelings ○ Allow opportunities for them to express a range of emotions ○ Help them stay connected with peers ○ Maintain supportive relationships with trusted adults ○ Encourage remembering the loved one who has died – look at pictures together, tell stories ○ Provide reassurance about stability and safety ○ Allow them some control over how they grieve ○ Help them to re-enter favourite activities / hobbies or try new ones ○ Have a consistent adult at school who can regularly check in with the child ○ Have strategies at school to help them – also being mindful of key dates ○ Manage transitions (home to school, holidays etc) ○ Adults in family to ensure they have adequate emotional support ○ Rather than asking *"What's wrong with this behaviour?"* be curious *"What might this behaviour be holding, expressing or protecting?"*

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Young people aged 12 +	Adolescents understand death in adult terms but must integrate grief into **identity development**. ○ Questioning meaning, purpose, or faith ○ Awareness of their own mortality ○ Belief that they must be strong for others ○ Desire to protect parents or siblings ○ Internal conflict between needing support and seeking independence ○ Comparing their grief to peers ○ Fear of appearing vulnerable	○ Profound sadness ○ Anger ○ Irritability ○ Anxiety ○ Insecurity ○ Emptiness ○ Loneliness ○ Shame ○ Hopelessness ○ Confusion ○ Guilt ○ Emotional numbness ○ Feeling misunderstood ○ Fear ○	○ Withdrawal ○ Risk-taking behaviours ○ Substance experimentation ○ Academic disengagement ○ Changes in peer groups ○ Acting out ○ Mood swings ○ Changes in eating or sleeping (too much or too little) ○ Seeking independence more strongly ○ Increased time online or alone ○ Existential questioning ○ Difficulty understanding emotions ○ Snapping at others, defiance or lower tolerance for frustration ○ Argumentative ○ Avoidance	○ Respect their need for independence while remaining available ○ Listen without judgement ○ Validate & normalise complex feelings ○ Allow opportunities for them to express a range of emotions ○ Encourage connection with trusted adults ○ Support peer bereavement groups ○ Provide safe outlets for expression – art, music, movement) ○ Monitor for high-risk behaviours ○ Allow them to participate in memorial decisions ○ Encourage healthy coping strategies ○ Share grief authentically while maintaining adult stability ○ Have a consistent adult at school who can regularly check in with the child ○ Have strategies at school to help them – also being mindful of key dates ○ Be patient as they navigate their grief and are also in a complex stage of their development ○ Talk about the person who has died and share memories and create ways to support a continuing bond ○ Rather than asking *"What's wrong with this behaviour?"* be curious *"What might this behaviour be holding, expressing or protecting?"*