



# HOW CHILDREN GRIEVE

Presented by Military & Family Life Counselors

# OBJECTIVES

- Stages Of Children's Grief
- Children's Concepts And Beliefs
- Emotional and Behavioral Responses
- How To Help
- Special Considerations: Combat Related Deaths
- Informing A Child Of A Death
- Words That Can Help
- Words That Can Hurt
- Taking Care Of Yourself



# INTRODUCTION

- Children grieve differently from adults
- How children grieve depends on the developmental stage of the child
- Helping children requires understanding the grief response at different stages of development



# STAGES OF GRIEF – AGES 6 AND ABOVE

- Denial – younger children may make believe the deceased will come back
- Anger – may have anger at the deceased, other adults, siblings, peers and will act these feelings out
- Bargaining – offers to “be good” if deceased can come back
- Guilt – feels their actions, words, thoughts caused the death
- Acceptance – accepts their loved one is not coming back



# BIRTH TO TWO YEARS: CONCEPT & BELIEF

- No concept of death
- Does not have words for feelings
- Aware of absence
- Notices changes in routine
- Picks up on emotions of family



# BIRTH TO TWO YEARS: EMOTIONS & BEHAVIORS

## Emotions

- Longing
- Fears of abandonment
- Anxiety
- Misses sounds, smells, sight of loved one

## Behaviors

- Crying more than usual
- Sickness
- Sleep disturbance
- Throwing things, biting



# HOW TO HELP CHILDREN TWO AND UNDER

- Lots of physical contact, holding, cuddling
- Maintain routines as much as possible
- Meet immediate physical needs
- Be gentle and patient



# THREE TO FIVE YEARS: CONCEPTS & BELIEFS

- No concept that death is permanent
- Understands body is not functioning, but sees this as temporary
- Wonders what the deceased is doing
- Fantasies may be worse than realities





# EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Anxiety and worry
- Sadness
- Fear
- Anger
- Confusion
- Feelings of guilt
- Insecurity
- Irritability



# BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

- Can vary widely from active and playful to sad and withdrawn
- Regressive behaviors (thumb sucking, bed wetting)
- Repetitive questions about deceased
- Frequent crying
- Aggressive behaviors
- Disturbing dreams
- Pretend games of death



# HOW TO HELP THE THREE TO FIVE YEAR OLD

- Be patient with regressive behaviors
- Give lots of affection and nurturing
- Encourage them to play and have fun
- Help them express feelings through play, art, stories – this is how they learn
- Maintain routines when possible
- They need LOTS of repetition - answer their repetitive questions honestly, and use simple, age-appropriate language
- Involve them in family rituals whenever possible



# SIX TO TWELVE YEARS: CONCEPTS & BELIEFS

- Understands death is forever
- Experiences denial
- Interested in biology of death
- May believe their thoughts, words, actions caused the death
- May think death is punishment
- Has formed spiritual beliefs and concepts about death
- Concerns about how the death will affect their well-being
- Understands deceased will not be part of future events
- High death awareness - Fear that others may die



# EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Sadness
- Shock
- Fearfulness
- Guilt
- Abandonment
- Anger
- Confusion
- Vulnerability
- Worry
- Loneliness



# BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

- May act as if death did not occur
- Regressive behaviors
- Fluctuating moods
- Asks about details of death
- Hides feelings
- Withdraws from friends and family
- Change in grades
- Aggressive acting out
- Protective of surviving loved ones
- Nightmares and sleep disturbance



# HOW TO HELP SIX TO TWELVE YEAR OLDS

- Provide lots of physical contact
- Answer questions truthfully
- Maintain routines
- Encourage appropriate expression of feelings
- Help the child find support from friends, relatives, school counselors
- Encourage them to let you know when they are worried or having a difficult time
- Inform school and adjust workload if needed
- Let the child be involved in family rituals and ceremonies
- Give them information about what to expect over the next few days



# TEENS: CONCEPTS & BELIEFS

- Understands the finality of death
- Experiences denial
- May think thoughts/actions caused death
- Thinks about life's milestones without the deceased
- High death awareness— fears other loved ones may die
- Need to be in control of feelings
- Fear that showing feelings will make them weak
- Internal conflict about dependence and desire for independence
- May utilize spiritual concepts to cope





# EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Sadness
- Anger
- Loneliness
- Fearful/anxious
- Highly self-conscious about being different due to grief
- Shock
- Confusion
- Vulnerability
- Guilty
- Feelings of abandonment



# BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

- Mood swings
- May act like death never happened
- Occasional regressive behavior
- Aggressive acting out
- Withdrawal
- Nightmares and sleep disturbance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Change in grades
- Impulsive, high risk behaviors
- Change in peer group
- Change in eating habits



# HOW TO HELP TEENS

- Expect and accept mood swings
- Allow regressive behavior and offer comfort
- Encourage expression of feelings, but don't force it
- Let them know you are available when they are ready to talk
- Offer physical contact
- Allow choices about involvement in death and mourning
- Answer questions truthfully
- Share your grief
- Watch for high risk behaviors
- Help them find peer support groups



# SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS: COMBAT RELATED DEATH

- Emotional impact can be traumatic due to sudden and violent nature of death
- If living on an installation, may also lose home, school and friends
- Local media attention can cause additional stress
- If family is not on an installation, teachers and counselors may not be sensitive to military culture



# SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS: COMBAT RELATED DEATH

CONTINUED

## Encouraging participation in military rituals and ceremonies provides children with:

- A context for the loss
- Acknowledgement of deceased's important role
- Recognition deceased was part of a greater whole
- Support from military community
- A way for the child to feel involved and connected



# OVERALL GUIDELINES

- Let your genuine concern and caring show
- Be available to the child to listen, talk and to give a hug
- Allow the child to express and share as much grief as they want
- Encourage the child to be patient with their own grief
- Explain physical changes that occur after death – otherwise, the child may think the deceased is in pain
- Do not describe death in terms of “going to sleep” or “going away”



# INFORMING A CHILD OF A DEATH

- Evaluate your own emotional state
- If you need support, ask someone to be with you when you talk to the child
- Keep it simple
- Use “died,” not “He is sleeping”
- Allow the child to express feelings freely



# INFORMING A CHILD OF A DEATH

CONTINUED

- Answer questions honestly and simply
- Assure the child they will be safe and cared for and explain the plan
- Explain what will be happening in the next few days
- Give your child choices about what to do





# WORDS THAT CAN HELP

- I'm sorry your mom/dad/brother/grandmother... died.
- Tell me about them.
- What do you miss the most?
- What is the hardest part for you?
- I care about you and how you're feeling.
- I'm here to listen if you want to talk, or just spend time together if you don't want to talk.



# WORDS THAT CAN HURT

- I know just how you feel.
- It was meant to be.
- You'll get over it.
- Don't think about it.
- Tears won't bring her/him back.
- You're the man/woman of the house now.
- It will be okay.



# WHEN TO SEEK HELP

## Children who are having serious problems with grief and loss may show one or more of these signs:

- An extended period of sadness in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events
- Inability to sleep, loss of appetite, prolonged fear of being alone
- Acting much younger for an extended period
- Repeated statements of wanting to join the deceased
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school



# TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

## Coping with a child's grief puts added strain on the bereaved caregiver

- Let your family and friends help you
- Rest whenever you can
- Maintain a healthy diet
- Exercise
- Share your feelings with others
- Arrange for child care and give yourself a break



# SUMMARY

- Helping children grieve requires understanding the grief response at different stages of development
- Younger children learn and process through play and need lots of repetition
- Peer support is helpful for older children and adolescents
- Regressive behaviors are normal
- Both children and adolescents need more nurturing
- Caregivers should seek support and let family and friends help whenever possible





**QUESTIONS?**

# RESOURCES

- Military Community Services
- Chaplain and Local Clergy
- Military OneSource (800) 342-9647
- TRICARE [www.Tricare.mil](http://www.Tricare.mil)
- Behavioral Health Services

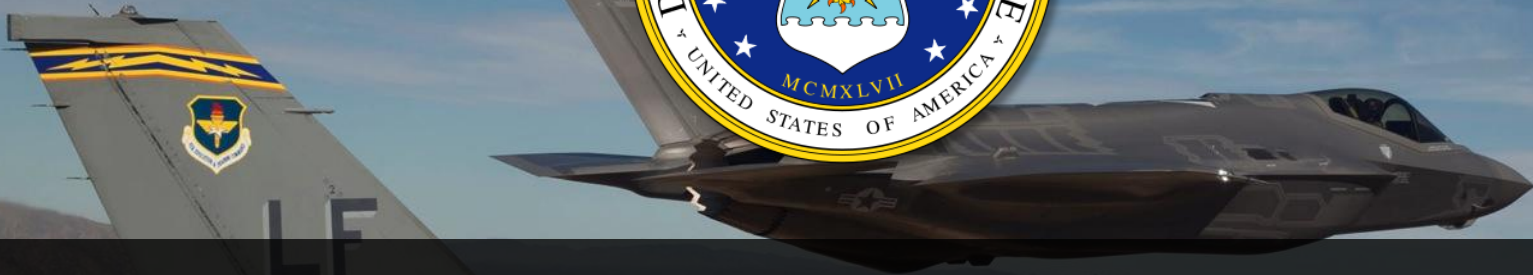


# REFERENCES

- Helping Children and Adolescents Deal With Grief, Gerard A. Jacobs, Ph.D., [www.usd.edu.org](http://www.usd.edu.org)
- Grief and Children, Kimberly L. Keith, [www.childparenting.about.com](http://www.childparenting.about.com)
- Bereavement and Grief: Information for Military Families and Communities, [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)
- Navigating Children's Grief: How to Help Following a Death, Mary M. Lyles, Children's Grief Education Association, [www.childgrief.org](http://www.childgrief.org)
- Helping Children Cope With Loss Resulting from War or Terrorism, Operation Healthy Reunions, [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)
- Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors – assists children and adults who have lost family members in the military - [www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org).







**THANK YOU**

