

Speaker Notes

Title of Presentation: How Children Grieve

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- Babies and toddlers will have no understanding of what has happened, but they will pick up on the moods and behaviors and breaks in routine of the adults around them.
- Preschoolers will understand the words you are saying, but will have no concept that death is final.
- Children grieve differently from adults – younger children don't have language and may act out their feelings through art, made up songs and pretend games.
- Regressive behaviors are common with younger children and can even happen with adolescents.

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- The description of the stages presumes the child is old enough to understand that death is final. Children don't understand the finality of death until around age 6.
- **Denial** – child may talk about what they will do with the deceased when they return home.
- **Anger** – angry outbursts may occur seemingly without cause and come out of nowhere. The child is simply acting out strong feelings of grief that overtake them.
- **Bargaining** - child may offer to be good, do better in school, be nicer to siblings, etc. if God will bring the loved one back.
- **Guilt** – often the child feels their behavior has caused the person to die. If they had been nicer, better, more helpful, made better grades, etc., then this wouldn't have happened.

Page 5 – Babies and toddlers will have no understanding of what has happened, but they will pick up on the mood, behaviors and breaks in routine of the adults and older children around them.

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- Although very young children don't understand what has happened, they can have strong reactions to the adults around them.
- Providing lots of physical attention and responding to any physical needs (food, diapers, rest, holding) as soon as possible increases the child's sense of security.
- This can be very difficult if the caretaker is also bereaved. Make sure to enlist the help of friends and family whenever possible.

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- Sometimes the response of young children can be upsetting to the adults around them. A child who is playful and happy and playing pretend games about the deceased can seem insensitive. Remember that developmentally, this is how the child processes their thoughts and feelings – through play. Their grief is also cyclical – they may be happy and playful one minute and then withdrawn and sad the next.
- They will ask the same questions over and over again. This is their way of trying to understand what has happened.

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- Regressive behaviors such as thumb sucking are to be expected. Some children may have to be re-potty trained. Expect this and be very patient and non-critical.
- It's not possible to give too much affection and love. Your child will need lots of physical attention to feel secure.
- Be accepting of their feelings and help them act out their feelings in appropriate ways such as through artwork, games, songs, stories.
- When answering questions, keep the responses simple and in language they can understand. Don't expect them to understand the death. They are too young to conceptualize that.

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- Let your genuine caring show – It helps the child to see that grief is normal even for adults and that he/she is not alone.
- Encourage the child to be patient – explain that grief is a cycle and feelings can come and go when least expected.
- Physical changes – for example, explain that the person stops breathing forever and can no longer feel pain. Otherwise the child may have fears about the burial process, thinking the deceased will suffocate, or will feel pain.
- Describing death as “going to sleep” can result in fears about sleep. It can also lead to the child thinking the person will wake up after they are buried and suffer. Describing the deceased as “gone away” may lead the child to feeling abandoned.

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- Offer only as much detailed information about the death as is requested.
- Give your child choices. Some may want to go to school the day of or after the death. Familiar routines are comforting. Inform the school of the death before your child returns.

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