

# How is Grief Showing Up in Kids?

*Edited by Merle Meyers*

## **Ages 2–5**

1. The child might seem unaffected by news of the death.
2. The child may perceive death as temporary and reversible.
3. There can be physical (body) complaints, aches and pains, or lethargy.
4. There can be a regression, or a "moving backwards." An example would be that a five-year-old who lost a parent or sibling has begun acting like he did when he was two years old by wetting the bed, or screaming when he wants something, or forgetting how to do a task he's done for some time.

An adult could easily interpret regression as "acting up" or deliberate bad behavior. But Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a foremost authority on Grief and Mourning, argues that children grieving have much to teach us, and are the best teachers.

As discussed earlier at the REMEMBER banner during the walk at camp:

*You must go backward and complete your memory of your loved one and events with them before you can move forward in your grief work.*

Wolfelt says that what these children are doing is going back in time to a time and place in their lives when they felt safe and taken care of. He calls these "care-eliciting behaviors," not regression behaviors.

1. Separation anxiety can appear, which is no surprise.
2. They can show an Approach, also called Embracing their feelings, which is normal and healthy.
3. They can show an Avoid manner of dealing with their feelings, running away from emotional situations, which is also common, but leads to stuffing their grief
4. They can express their feelings through artwork and play.
5. Children need solid and truthful information to process in their own good time, and they need routine comfort.

## **Ages 6–9**

1. Expect "Magical Thinking." The greatest tool for learning is their imagination.
2. Either the Approach or Avoid manner of dealing with feelings will surface.
3. Unruly or acting out in place of showing emotion, or behavior regression (may affect school).
4. They may have difficulty expressing emotions verbally.
5. They can be strongly attuned to the grief responses of others.

6. They can have separation anxiety.
7. They need solid, accurate information, opportunities for expression, good role models, a routine, and boundaries, and might need physical expression of comfort including hugging, handholding, and physical exercise such as sports and playing.

### **Ages 10–12**

1. There is a better understanding of death, which may intensify reactions.
2. They might experience school phobias and separation anxiety.
3. There might be body complaints.
4. To protect others, they might not express grief outwardly.
5. Grief expressions might be delayed by weeks or months.
6. They can be vulnerable to "parentification" (see Glossary of Terms), filling the role reversal of being a parent for other children or for an adult in their environment.
7. Early changes in puberty may complicate their responses.
8. They need encouragement to share; opportunities for artistic, written, or musical expression; physical activity, physical contact for some; memorialization, a solid and consistent daily routine, and clearly communicated boundaries.

### **Adolescence**

1. Their grief might be complicated by changes in adolescence.
2. Their abstract thinking skills allow for a more sophisticated understanding of death, including a spiritual and existential component.
3. They might utilize maladaptive (unsuitable) coping strategies.
4. They can commonly experience a temporary decrease in school performance.
5. They can suffer guilt and regret.
6. They can be vulnerable to parentification (taking on the role of parent).
7. They might need opportunities for physical activity, appropriate physical contact, and a basic daily routine that can provide structure but be somewhat flexible.
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### **What Does Grief Look Like in Families?**

1. All family members might be experiencing their own changing grief reactions.
2. The everyday challenges of parenting can be intensified.
3. Roles in the family have shifted or continue to shift.
4. The family or members might talk about the loss.
5. The family needs opportunities to express their individual and family grief experience and receive support while parenting or caregiving.