

Grief and Loss: Helping Young Children Cope

Stages of Grief

Stage One: Denial & Shock – a state of disbelief

There's often a fantasy that the loss didn't really happen or can be reversed. Children can experience physical, cognitive and behavioral symptoms as well as emotional symptoms. These symptoms can be seen as:

- Flat emotions
- Compliant behavior
- Rhythmic movement for emotional release
- Clinging to mementos
- Tendency to injury
- Development of real or imaginary illnesses (stomach ache, headache, etc)

Stage Two: Bargaining or Magical Thinking – linking unrelated causes to the loss

Children often think there's something they can do to undo or magically reverse the loss. This stage might be seen as:

- Dramatic changes in compliance
- Perfectionism
- Dedication to something the child thinks will correct or change the reality of what happened

Stage Three: Feelings of Helplessness, Anger, Despair, Depression

These are physical and psychic expressions of grief, such as:

- Defiance and talking back
- Swearing
- Temper tantrums
- Fighting and hurting others, themselves, small animals or property
- Regressing in development
- Withdrawal
- Guilt expressed through "If only . . . , then this wouldn't have happened " comments

Stage Four: Resolution & Understanding – letting go of anger and guilt

A period of calm when children may appear to be more relaxed and at ease. You may also see:

- Improved concentration and focus
- Talking about the loss or tragedy without evidencing anger or agitation

Stage Five: Demonstration of Acceptance, Hope and Resilience – moving on from the loss

Instead of being stuck in the painful memories, children demonstrate acceptance through:

- Reflection on the past, drawing strength from it
- Talking about the future

Children bounce back and forth between these stages, and can take breaks from their grief.

Adapted from 'The Stages for Processing Grief and Loss', Making It Better, Activities for Children Living in a Stressful World. Oehlberg, Barbara. 1996. Redleaf Press.