

Teenagers & Grief

Like adults, children will react to the news of death individually, perhaps with unexpected responses. The child may say, "it's not true" or lash out physically or verbally. Wanting to be left alone or being curious and full of questions may be more common for some children than sadness.

Later, as the loss sinks in, some children may show their grief by changed behaviour, like angry outbursts or a lack of interest in their usual activities or schoolwork. Fears may surface - "I don't understand what's going on."

Children are best helped by adults who give them clear and honest explanations about death and who allow tears or other feelings to surface without criticism or rejection. To say to a teenager "We lost a friend tonight" can be vague and confusing. Such explanations equate death with simple going away and can leave the child with the expectation that at some future time the person will return.

Teenagers can be particularly vulnerable when a school friend or family member dies because their grief may become complicated by the usual ups and downs associated with adolescence. Their need to appear 'grown up' in front of their peers, or their family, could result in isolation and difficulty in asking for help or expressing feelings.

It is not necessary for adults to hide their own tears from children of any age - your grief will show them that they need not be ashamed or scared to express their own. By doing this, they will not carry unresolved childhood losses into their adult lives, nor will they learn unhelpful ways of coping with grief such as masking their true feelings or believing that they must bear their hurt, confusion, questions, anger or fear silently.