

How Children Grieve Differently Than Adults

Practical guidance for understanding what may be happening underneath behavior and helping families move forward.

A grieving child may cry intensely - and then ask to play five minutes later. That can confuse adults. Children often move in and out of grief differently than adults do.

They may experience grief in shorter periods and revisit the loss repeatedly as they mature.

Grief Can Show Up as Behavior

Children may not say, “I am experiencing grief.” Instead, adults might notice irritability, clinginess, sleep changes, school difficulties, anger, regression, physical complaints, increased fears, trouble concentrating, repeated questions, or changes in play.

Not every behavioral change after a death is necessarily caused by grief, but changes deserve curiosity.

Children May Revisit Grief as They Grow

A young child understands death differently than an adolescent. As children’s cognitive and emotional development changes, they may return to the loss with new questions.

A child who seemed to cope well at age seven may experience the loss differently at twelve or sixteen. That does not necessarily mean they are moving backward. They may be understanding the loss at a new developmental level.

Keep the Door Open

Children benefit from knowing they can ask questions. You do not need perfect words.

Try: “You can talk to me about them whenever you want.” “It is okay if you are sad, angry, confused - or even having a good day.” “We do not all have to grieve the same way.”

Children need truthful, developmentally appropriate information and reassurance that their feelings and questions are welcome.

ETHOS SHORELINE REFLECTION

How can I make room for my child’s grief without expecting it to look like mine?

Related Ethos Shoreline pathway: My Place After Loss™



A Note for Parents

Behavior makes more sense when we understand what is happening underneath it. Ethos Shoreline resources are designed to help families build practical structure while protecting connection, responsibility, and belonging.

Educational Disclaimer: This resource is for general educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized mental-health, medical, educational, or emergency services. Consider consulting an appropriately qualified professional when concerns are persistent, worsening, affecting daily functioning, or creating safety concerns.

