

About.com Palliative Care

The Needs of Grieving Children

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In our culture, we tend to think of bereaved survivors of palliative care¹ and hospice² patients as adults, whether it be a surviving spouse or grown children of the deceased. While it's true that the majority of palliative care and hospice patients are elderly, senior citizens certainly aren't the only population accessing its services. Hospice and palliative care services can accommodate all age groups from infants through elderly. This obviously can include adults that care for young children or adolescents.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 1.5 million children are living in a single-family household because of the death of one parent. One out of every 20 children age 15 and younger will suffer the loss of one or both parents. These statistics don't account for the number of children who lose a "parental figure," such as a grandparent or other relative that provide care.

Based on these numbers, the need for adequate support and counseling of bereaved children is critical. Unfortunately, many medical institutions, palliative care programs, and even hospice programs don't offer specialized support for children. The good news is that there is growing awareness of this need. Physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, social workers, and chaplains are all beginning to recognize the needs of these children.



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Myths About Children, Adolescent, and Grief

One way to increase awareness of children's needs is to dispel the myths that surround their grief.

1. **Young children do not grieve.** Children grieve at any age. Their grief can be manifested in many ways depending on their age, developmental stage, and life experiences. Children often do a very good job at grieving intensely for a time and then taking a break. The break is usually in the form of play. Adults often mistake a child's play as a sign that the child isn't grieving, which is just not true.
2. **Children should go to funerals. Children should not go to funerals.** Both statements are myths. Children, even very young ones, should have a choice whether they want to attend the funeral. Each child handles their loss differently and should be allowed to grieve as they wish. For their choice to be a meaningful one, they need information, options, and support.
3. **Children get over loss quickly.** Adults never get over a significant loss so why should children? The truth is that no one really gets over a significant loss. We can learn to live with the loss and adapt to the reality that the one we love is no longer here, but we can never forget the intense feeling of loss. Children may revisit their loss at different stages in their development and as their understanding of the loss changes, their grief may arise again.
4. **Children will be permanently scarred by a significant loss.** Children, like most people, are resilient. A significant loss can affect a child's development but adequate support and continuing care can help them deal with their feelings of grief appropriately.
5. **Encouraging children to talk about their feelings of grief is the best way to work through their loss.** It is important to allow children to talk through their feelings and to promote open communication.

However, other approaches, such as art, play, music, and dance allow children to express their feelings. Children and adolescents may use these methods to express their grief and adapt to their loss with a more positive outcome.

Working through grief and adapting to loss is important for children. Studies have shown that children and adolescents that have unresolved grief are at a higher risk for developing depression and anxiety as adults. It's important then that palliative care and hospice practitioners, as well as other family members, recognize the needs of grieving children and help them access the resources they need.

Source:

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