Children and the **GRIEVING PROCESS**

Avera Behavioral Health

CHILDREN AND THE GRIEVING PROCESS

Talking to children about death is not an easy thing for parents to do. Sometimes questions about death come up unexpectedly. At other times, the death of a family member or friend will make it necessary to have this discussion. You are the best resource and support as your child works through the grief process.

CHILDREN'S CONCEPT OF DEATH BY DEVELOPMENTAL AGE

A child's age and developmental stage, as well as his or her maturity, will affect understanding of death. These are guidelines for what to expect. Remember, children develop at different rates and there may be a great deal of overlapping in these age categories. Each child will grieve in his or her own unique way. Besides development, the child's temperament — his or her approach to life — will affect the grief process.

Babies and Toddlers

Very young children have no concept of death, but it will certainly impact them. Death of an important person like a parent or primary caregiver likely will have a profound effect on the child. Infants and toddlers may suffer detachment issues. Their lack of language may cause adults to believe that they are not grieving. Very young children will grieve loss of normal routine and the loss of physical contact with the loved one. When the death involves someone less involved in their daily care, these children will react to the grief and depression of those closest to them.

Ages 3 – 5 (Preschoolers)

- Believe death is temporary, impersonal and reversible
  Example: "Grandpa will be back for my birthday."
- Believe they can "wish" people dead and bring them back to life, which may cause them to think they are responsible for the death
- Are concrete thinkers and may ask very pointed, logical questions
  Example: "Where are Grandma's feet (in the casket)?"
- Are not able to understand facts about death, which can lead to fantasy and magical thinking, and can result in unrealistic fears
- May blame the deceased person for their fears and negative thoughts
- May show grief with tantrums, clinginess, thumb sucking, potty accidents, etc.
- May have short spans of grief that come (sometimes unexpectedly) and go

Ages 5 – 9

- Are able to understand that death is permanent and that all living things die, but still may "bargain" for the return of the loved one
  Example: "If I get all A's, maybe my mom will come back."
- Will need simple, honest and accurate information
- Will need to know that it is OK to ask questions
- May want to see lots of pictures and talk frequently about the person who died
- May think death is contagious
- May have unusual concepts of death because of things seen on television or in the movies
- May have short grief spans that come and go

Ages 9 – 11

- May have a more realistic view of death
- May have widely varying concepts of personal death; some children may not fully accept death and believe they are invincible while others may fear death
- May seem self-centered in their grief
  Example: "Since my brother died, he doesn't need his bike anymore, so can I have it?"
- Grieving may come and go, and at times the child may seem indifferent

Adolescents

- May have difficulty expressing their emotions about death
- May sometimes seem unconcerned about the death, which could be a defense mechanism to remain in emotional control
- May participate in risky behaviors or use inappropriate humor as a way to cover their grief
- Will often look to their peers/friends for advice and emotional support. Because their peers may have little or no experience with grief issues, this advice may be inappropriate. Adolescents should be encouraged to share the information they get from peers with a trusted adult (parent, counselor, clergy).

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF

As your child deals with grief, there are things you can do to help. Always remember to keep in mind the child's age and stage of development.

- Ask the child for his or her own explanation of what has happened, which will help the adult understand the child's perspective
- Give the child clear, simple explanations and remember, it's OK to admit that you don't have all the answers to the mystery of death
- Let the child know that his or her questions and feelings are OK and that other children have the same feelings
- Allow the child to see others express grief
  Example: It's OK to grieve in front of your child.
- Listen carefully to questions and always answer truthfully
  Example: If the child asks, "Are you going to die?" reassure him by saying, "Most people die when they are old," rather than "No, I won't die."
- Use correct words, such as "died" rather than "went to sleep" or "went on a long journey"
- Encourage the child to maintain her usual interests and activities
- Talk positively about the future and reassure the child that even though we feel bad now, we will work through our grief and someday feel better
- Contact your child's school about the loss and keep communication open between you and your child's teacher and ask that the school counselor be involved
- Find ways for the child to remember and honor the loved one — write a letter or song, draw a picture, make a keepsake box or photo remembrance album, do a service project
- Sometimes a child may feel guilty about something he or she said or did — or didn't do; writing a letter asking for forgiveness may be a way to resolve this
- Offer your love, understanding and support whenever the child needs it

GRIEF RITUALS

Funerals, wakes, memorial services, prayer services with viewing of the body, graveside services and cemetery visits are all grief rituals in our society. Allow the child to decide what he is comfortable attending. There are no strict age guidelines for this. Prepare the child by explaining exactly what to expect.

Example: "All of Aunt Jane's friends and family will be together to share our sadness, but also to remember how special she was."

Include details like:

- What the room will look like
- Where the body will be
- What will take place — talking, music, prayers, etc.
- Emotions, Example: "Some people will laugh when they remember how funny she was and others may cry because they will miss her."
- Symbolism — flowers, pictures, kneeling by the casket, sprinkling dirt in the grave, etc.
- Funeral procession to the cemetery
- Military rites

Ask a trusted friend or family member to provide back-up in case your child needs to leave the service. Remember that young children may ask many questions. Even though some of them may seem rude or disrespectful, the child is being naturally curious and is trying to understand.

WORDS ARE POWERFUL

Here are some ideas to help parents choose words to explain grief and death:

- "Something very sad has happened. Grandma has died and I'm crying because I'm sad."
- "Everyone dies, but most people don't die until they are old."
- "Uncle John's body stopped working and it can't start working again. When someone dies, they can't come alive again."
- "When people die, we bury (or cremate) their whole body. But their spirit, the part of them that makes them special, goes to heaven. It also stays alive in our memories."
- "If you ever feel like talking about your friend, just the two of us, let me know."
- "Something just reminded me of Grandpa and that made me sad. It is OK to be sad."

Words to avoid when talking about death and dying

"**Don't feel bad.** Grandma is in heaven."

"**It's like going to sleep** for a long time."

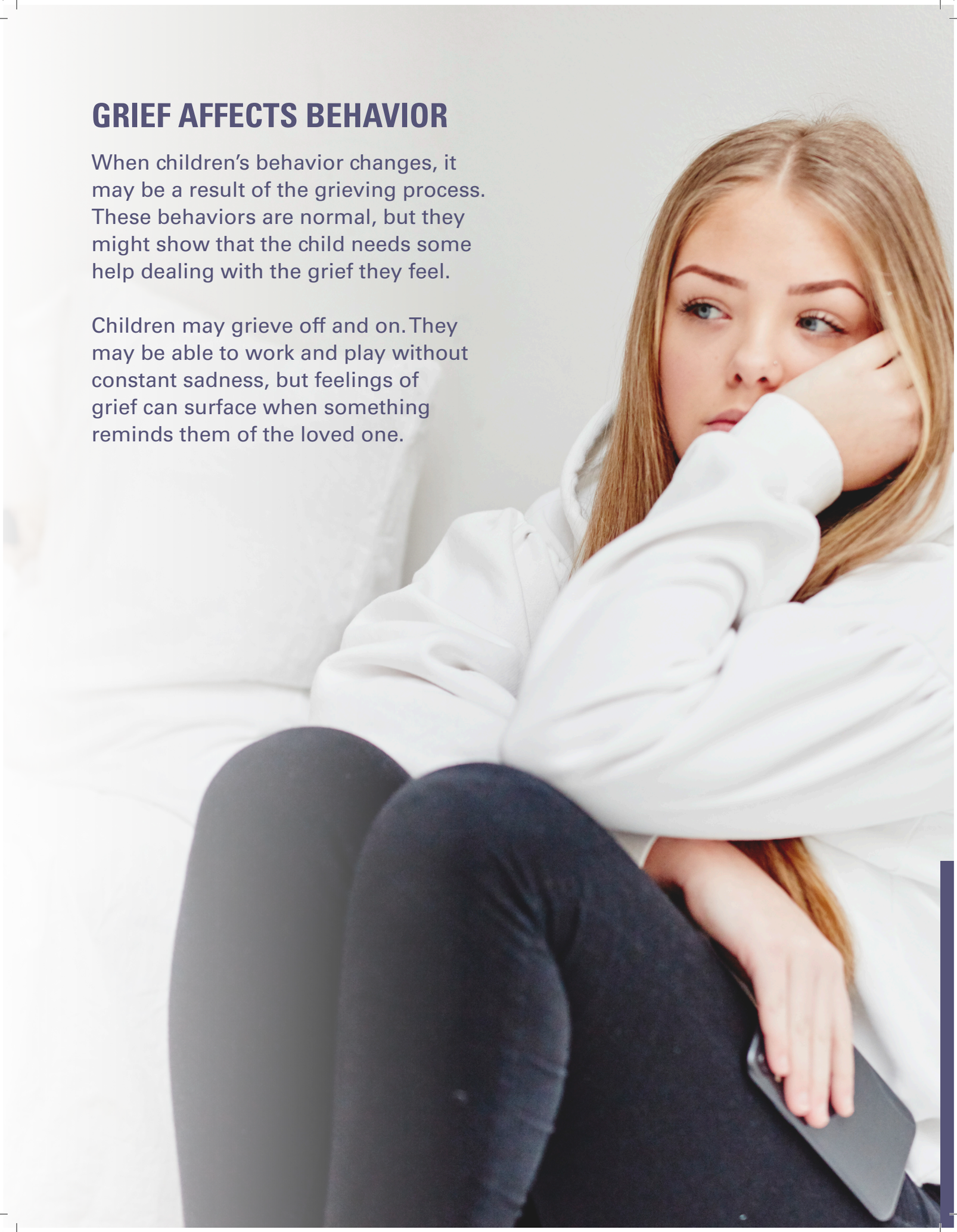
"**Don't cry.** Grandpa would want you to **be brave.**"

"Uncle Joe died, **but it's OK.**"

GRIEF AFFECTS BEHAVIOR

When children's behavior changes, it may be a result of the grieving process. These behaviors are normal, but they might show that the child needs some help dealing with the grief they feel.

Children may grieve off and on. They may be able to work and play without constant sadness, but feelings of grief can surface when something reminds them of the loved one.



COMMON FEELINGS

- Frightening thoughts that can be hard to express
- Guilt or a feeling of responsibility for the death because of something that was said or done
- Fear that someone else they love might die
- Anger toward God, health care workers, family members or the one who died
- Denial of the death
- Grief for the loss of schedule, routine or attention

COMMON BEHAVIORS

- Regressive behavior like bed-wetting, thumb sucking, etc.
- Boisterous or wild play
- Irritability
- Nightmares and sleep issues
- Anger
- Acting withdrawn/unusual shyness
- Decreased school performance
- Misbehavior to get attention
- Acting unconcerned

WHEN TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S GRIEF

At times, a child who has experienced loss may need professional assistance to help them learn about grief and learn how to process their grief. Some signs of a child having grief that may need professional assistance may include:

- An extended period of depression in which the child loses interest in daily activities and events
- Prolonged sleep problems, loss of appetite or fear of being alone
- Prolonged regression — acting younger than his or her age
- Excessively imitating the dead person
- Repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
- Withdrawal from friends
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
- Taking chances with his or her own life with risky games or activities; may include use of drugs or alcohol, reckless driving, and unlawful activities
- Long-term denial of the death

RESOURCES

- Books, DVDs and online resources may be a way to help children understand and talk about death
- Ask your school counselor for advice
- Ask your priest, rabbi, pastor or other spiritual adviser for suggestions
- Ask your church librarian, school librarian or children's book specialist at your bookstore
- Visit centering.org

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO HANDLE LIFE ON YOUR OWN.

Difficult life experiences including grief and loss can create mental and emotional stressors that if left unaddressed create larger issues. Accessing support can be helpful during this time and seeking help does not mean you are not "strong enough." Avera is here to support your mental health.

Call Avera Behavioral Health Center at **605-322-4079**.

Call Avera McKennan Hospital & University Health Center Family Life Education at **605-322-3660**.

Call the Helpline at **211** for confidential help from a caring expert and for locating other resources near you.

Always read the book or review the material first, before sharing it with your child. Make sure it aligns with your family's beliefs and values.

Avera Behavioral Health

Avera.org/BehavioralHealth

© 2023 Avera Health, All Rights Reserved BHCS-359491-REV092723