

Information for Parents Regarding Coping with Death and Grief

In light of the sad news of Officer Chesna's death, we wanted to provide some resources for families both around understanding children's reactions to death, as well as offering some tips for supporting children.

Children's Understanding of Death: Early Childhood (4-7) ¹ **Concept of Death**

This age group may view death as temporary and reversible. "Magical thinking" can color the thoughts of kids this age, and they may think their actions or behaviors caused the death. They may believe one has control over avoiding death through their own actions. They also may make up their own ideas of what the death may be connected to (i.e. something specific that happened that day) if they do not understand what happened and why.

Grief Response:

Children this age may do a lot of repetitive questioning about the death and what happens after death. Often, they process their understanding through play, where they may act out the death or funeral. They may present as if completely unaffected because they are not yet able to process it, or they may present as angry, sad, or confused. Difficulty eating or sleeping can be responses. They may regress in their behaviors and require more attention or care. They may also have a lot of fears about other people in their lives dying or leaving them.

Children's Understanding of Death: MIDDLE YEARS (7-10) ² **Concept of Death**

This age group may want to see death as reversible but they begin to see it as both final and universal. They are very curious about the details of death, cremation and burial and may ask candid questions. Even though they know death can happen to anyone and that there are many things that cause death, they still do not typically think of death as something that can happen to them or people close to them, but instead to only old or very sick people. They may believe that they can escape from death through their own efforts. They also might view death as a punishment, particularly before age nine. Sometimes they are unable to comprehend how the death will affect their life, which can become a source of anxiety.

Grief Response

Children in the middle years often become concerned with how others are responding to

¹ Adapted from <http://www.vitas.com/Services/LearnAboutHospice/BereavementSupport/GriefandBereavement/ChildrensDevelopmentalStagesConceptsofDeath.aspx> and <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/understand.html>

² Adapted from <http://www.vitas.com/Services/LearnAboutHospice/BereavementSupport/GriefandBereavement/ChildrensDevelopmentalStagesConceptsofDeath.aspx> and <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/understand.html>

the death as they become less focused on themselves and more on others. They may fear that other loved ones will die as well. Sometimes they may become overly concerned about their own health and may fear bodily harm and death.

Everyone experiences grief differently and needs time to process feelings and emotions. Some children may present as angry or sad, some may have a jocular attitude about the death, appearing indifferent, or others may withdraw and hide their feelings. Other typical responses include shock, denial, depression, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, and regression to an earlier developmental stage.

This age group tends to have more coping strategies available than younger children and may fantasize how they would prevent the death from happening again as a way to gain control over the situation. Death is also play acted in children at this age, especially for those children who have difficulty expressing feelings verbally.