

Supporting Infants and Toddlers Through Grief

CHILDREN AGES 0-2



For questions or to speak with a member of the Unity team, please call.
For additional resources and information on Unity's grief support
programming for children and adults, please visit Unity's website.



Strength
at Your Side

800.990.9249 • www.unityhospice.org

Developmental Information

At this age children function in the present.

Children aged 0-2 years are focused on what is going on around them and are adapting to their environment. Even though they do not understand illness and death, they are able to sense changes from the facial expressions, body language and behavior of the adults around them and will react to these changes.

Infants and toddlers experience a variety of feelings, but are not able to verbally communicate their needs.

Infants are likely to react to separation from parent(s) or other primary caregivers and any alteration in their routine. This is often expressed through crying. Toddlers are likely to respond to the emotions of others even without understanding what is going on. For example if a toddler is around caregivers and other adults who are sad, depressed, scared, or angry, they are likely to become upset or afraid as well. When strong emotions are being expressed in the presence of an infant or toddler it is also important to provide extra physical attention as well as other expressions of love and affection to them as it will likely enhance their comfort and sense of security.



When Someone is Very Ill

Tell the child in simple terms that the individual is sick. Using simple statements like "Grandpa is sick" will provide a message to the child that there is something going on. If the child is verbal they may ask questions. Responding with brief and simple explanations will be useful. You do not need to give long explanations about the illness or what to expect.

Provide security and maintain their normal routine as much as possible. Infants and toddlers feel most secure when their routine is maintained. Keeping things such as bedtime, mealtime, and story time at regularly scheduled times is important.

Choose supportive and familiar caregivers to be with the child when a parent or guardian is not able to be with them. Supportive and familiar caregivers will help to increase the child's comfort. They are likely to know the routines of the child which help provide a sense of security.

When Someone has Died

Use simple, but specific details to explain to the child the person has died. Although death has little to no meaning for an infant or toddler it is still okay to tell them someone has died. Use words such as "dead", "died" and "death". For older toddlers who are about 18 months or older, it is helpful to clarify that when someone dies their heart doesn't beat, their ears don't hear, their body doesn't move, etc., and the person cannot feel anything anymore. You will likely need to explain and remind them that the person who died will not be coming back to life. Even if there has been a previous experience of death the child may not understand the relationship between life and death.

Make funerals optional. As a parent or a guardian of an infant or toddler you will need to make the decision about whether or not they will attend the funeral or memorial service. These rituals may be overwhelming and confusing especially when they are likely to be around many people who are sad. If you want the child to be present for part of the service, make arrangements with a caregiver or trusted individual the child is familiar with to take the child home after a designated amount of time. You may also want to assign a support person, who can be flexible with what they are doing, to be with the child throughout the service.

Recognize they may need more reassurance and comforting. Allow and encourage use of comfort items, such as a stuffed animal or favorite blanket. If you note regressive behaviors (i.e. bedwetting if potty-trained or wanting a bottle when they no longer use one) do not be alarmed and do not punish them. Provide reassurance and gentle reminders.

Keep the deceased individual's memory present. If you have pictures of the deceased individual in the home it is okay for the child to see them. It will allow them to keep fond memories alive and create opportunities to talk about the deceased which can make the grieving process a little easier.

Save a memento for your child. Although you may wait until the child is older to give this item to them, consider keeping something that belonged to the deceased individual to serve as a reminder of that person. Some examples may be a baseball glove, jewelry, a watch, or other significant item. This will create an opportunity for the child to remember and talk about the deceased person years later when other memories might be forgotten.