



# How Children Experience Grief

Zoe came to my office after the death of her grandma and asked why God had not answered her prayers to keep her grandma alive. She got the impression from church that prayer functioned as if God was a genie in a bottle. So, when her grandmother got sick, she prayed that God would heal her. But her grandma still died, and she felt the pain of that loss severely.

Because God did not come through for her, this nine-year-old questioned His goodness. This death caused her to question her entire religious experience. She didn't want to be involved in church anymore, became depressed, and took on an overall negative view of God and the church. Even though Zoe was questioning God's existence, she had a deep longing within her for things to be made right. Zoe's grief response was completely normal for her age.

This sad story points to the important question of how we help grieving children. Many children in our churches and schools experience devastating losses, such as a death in the family, the divorce of parents, separation from a close friend, financial struggles, or even the death of a pet. In a pamphlet of expert advice for school counselors helping grieving students, this startling statistic appears: "Before they complete school, nine in 10 children will experience the death of a family member or close friend. One in 20 will lose a parent. This means that in almost every class, every year, in every school, there's likely to be at least one grieving student, if not more."

1. Children grieve internally just as much as adults, and they are far less equipped to handle their emotions. Children desperately need pastors and church members to pay attention to them and minister to their needs in times of grief. How do we effectively do that, especially depending on their age group?

## THE FORGOTTEN GRIEF

Children express their grief differently based on their age. Personality, family dynamics, and spiritual life all play a role in how a child grieves.

2. Older children question God's love and character, while younger children get confused about the emotions they are experiencing. During times of grief, most people focus on the adults. The question now is, Who notices the children and ministers to their needs?

When people don't know what to say to a grieving child, they commonly say things like: "Don't cry." "God has a plan." "They're just sleeping, Jesus will wake them up when He comes back to take us to heaven." "Pray, and maybe your parents will get back together." "Just have faith." These phrases make no sense to a young child and communicate the message that their grief is not important. Unfortunately, this lack of ministry to a child's life can have detrimental long-term effects on their view of God and the church and even on their own psyche as they try to make sense of a loss.

## Symptoms of grieving by age group

Often when children experience their first loss—a death in the family, the death of a pet, or the divorce of parents—they do not know how to handle their emotions. Many adults may miss the signs that children are grieving because their symptoms are different from those of the adults around them. While adults often stay consistently in a period of grieving for months after a loss, children are more fluid in their grieving and may feel strong emotional responses to grief for shorter periods, then go play happily until another short moment of overwhelming grief occurs. Much of what happens depends upon age. The following information is generalized per age group. Keep in mind that each child is his or her own person and may react differently.

Infants to two years old—primary experience: Absence. This age group shows signs of grieving through physiological symptoms, such as not sleeping well or having trouble eating. Young children do not understand abstract concepts like death. They just know someone they love is missing. Sometimes they look for the person that died, asking about them or waiting for them to come back to play.

Three to six years old—primary experience: Denial. During early childhood, death is seen as reversible. When death is explained biblically, as being ‘a sleep,’ children logically think the person who has died can be woken up. Children will not understand why you won’t wake up their loved one. They take on feelings of guilt and assume that the person went away because they did something wrong. Sometimes they will make a sort of shrine or do things like making their bed, cleaning their room, or preparing food for the dead loved one in hopes that the loved one will come back if the child is “good enough.”

I witnessed this with the young children of a family who had lost their grandmother. Two of the young daughters were in this age group, and after the death, they prepared a tea party for her, which had been their weekly tradition.

The adults in their life lovingly did their best to explain that Grandma had been put in a casket to sleep until Jesus comes. When their grandfather came to visit without their grandmother, they asked when Grandpa would take Grandma out of the box! Why wouldn’t he wake her up so that she could come to the tea party? They couldn’t understand the lack of her presence.

In the church context, children need to experience this healing power of Jesus through church members listening carefully to them, showing compassion for them, and staying close to them.

Seven to 12 years old - primary experience: Fear. Preteens begin to understand that death is final, and everyone will die. They see death as a concrete, physical thing. Ideas that make the most sense to them are the body of the person going to heaven, or a skeleton lying in a casket, or the person turning into a ghost or angel. Their views of death at this age are heavily influenced by the religious culture around them; they are curious about the afterlife and want to know what happens when we die.

When preteens experience any type of grief or loss, such as divorce or relocation, they will not want to talk about their feelings and will show signs of grief in physical ways, such as getting angry at school, causing drama with friends, getting sick frequently, or struggling with homework. Focusing on everyday tasks and controlling behavior is difficult.

4. I ministered to a few students in this age group who experienced loss when their parents were divorcing, leaving one set of siblings with a parent who moved far away from anything familiar to them. Another child was sent to live with grandparents. Another was bounced around to different friends’ homes until the legal issues were resolved. All of these children struggled with schoolwork, had problems with their friends, and would frequently come to my office either crying or angry, telling me how upset they were about something trivial at school.

David J. Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush researched grief in students and discovered that many students experiencing grief have trouble concentrating, are easily overwhelmed in class, and have many questions that need honest answers from teachers and influential adults.

Author Peter Wilcox addresses the importance of allowing grief to run its course. His comments are a reminder for us to sit in the grief with our children and experience it with them: “Grieving is not about forgetting. Rather, grieving allows us to heal and to remember with love rather than pain. It requires a sorting out process. One by one, you try to let go of the things that are gone and mourn for them. One by one, you take hold of the things that have become a part of who you are and gradually begin to build again.

This is not to suggest that this process of grieving is easy, only that it is necessary.”

6. Five stages of grief in children  
In the last church I (Joseph) pastored, I saw many children in my congregation go through traumatic experiences. In one instance, an infant died, causing his whole family, including his eight-year-old sister, deep despair. Not knowing how to minister to them, I did some research on the grief process.

The first thing I discovered was that I had a very shallow understanding of grief. One morning, in the midst of that research project, I received a call telling me that my mother had just died. I was thrust personally and traumatically into grief. I was suddenly going through the same stages of grief that I had been reading about.

Grief breaks our hearts and shakes our self-identity. But as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler discovered in their famous research, there are typically five different stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.<sup>7</sup> We have used different descriptive terms as they relate to the grief experience of children to convey the same ideas:

### Denial

The denial stage is characterized by numbness and shock as the idea settles in that a loss has occurred – almost as if God anesthetizes us to get us through those first few difficult hours and days after a loss. Older children will likely experience this stage similarly to adults, while young children will wonder what happened and not completely understand.

Expressed emotions. Kübler-Ross and Kessler typically name the second stage “anger,” but a variety of emotions will be experienced by both children and adults after a loss. Sometimes children, as well as adults, experience guilt. Children will especially wonder whether they could have done something to keep their loved one from moving away, leaving home, or whatever their loss is. Expressing emotion is important after a loss. We need to cry it out, work it out, talk it out, and pray it out.

### Questioning

Sometimes adults try to bargain with God over a loss, but because children may not understand the details of what happened, they tend to ask lots of questions as they try to understand what’s going on.

### Loneliness

The loneliness stage is characterized in adults as depression, and while it is possible for children to experience depression, often after a loss, a sense of loneliness is experienced by a child as they miss the deceased. In this stage, children feel that no one can relate to them, so it is important to let them know God is with them even in their pain.

### Acceptance

When the loss is finally accepted, the strength comes to go on with life. God helps you move on and live happily despite the pain of grieving you have gone through

Presence: Grief is a journey that takes time. As children go through this process, God will bring healing through many means. In the church context, children need to experience this healing power of Jesus through members listening carefully to them, showing compassion for them, and staying close to them. The good news of the Bible is that God is always there for them.

God has chosen young people to be His torchbearers, forging a path for truth to flourish.<sup>8</sup> He wants us to reach out to children in the spirit of Christ—as they grow, to be there for them in their joys and sorrows—as we have learned to be with our beloved Zoe.

1 David J. Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush, “Help for Grieving Students,” American School Counselor Association, January–February 2017, 21.

2 Paediatric Society New Zealand, “Bereavement Reactions of Children and Young People by Age Group,” KidsHealth, last reviewed April 13,

2017 kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-age-group.

3 Philip Yancey, “Living in a Broken World,” Focus on the Family, November 19, 2015,

focusonthefamily.com/parenting/spiritual-growth-for-kids/living-in-a-broken-world.

4 Schonfeld and Quackenbush, “Help for Grieving Students,” 22.

5 Schonfeld and Quackenbush, “Help for Grieving Students,” 22.

6 Peter C. Wilcox, Don’t Be a Waster of Sorrows: Nine Ways Our Sorrows Can Lead to a Deeper Spiritual Life (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015)

