

Presentation Summary

Late school age children react differently to loss than younger school age children or adults do primarily because the loss complicates the changes they are going through and they may even develop a morbid curiosity about death. Late school age is a time of transition between being a child and being an adult. At this age group a loss can be difficult because it occurs at a point in time that is already filled with constant life altering changes. Erik Erikson said they are in a stage of "Industry vs. Inferiority." This means they are trying to develop a sense of self-worth by acquiring and refining skills. They enjoy achievements and feel industrious when they succeed. Feelings of inferiority develop when there is repeated frustration and failure.

Jean Piaget said they are learning "Concrete Operations." This means they are developing an understanding of symbols, logical thinking, and organizational skills. They seek cues from others for reinforcement, and try to be good. When grieving they try to act tough, and are ashamed of tears. They question physical details not emotional aspects. At this time most late school age kids begin to understand their own mortality, and begin to wonder about mind- body- soul issues.

Children of this age know that death can happen to young as well as old, and that death has many different causes. However, they still think that death usually just happens to other people. A significant loss could result in a heightened interest or disinterest in physical appearance or extreme changes in body weight. There can be a complete logical approach to the grief, where the child notices what mourning is and wants to know and act out the rules. Parents often become overly protective which can result in the child becoming more rebellious. Fear may develop in the child about death, disfigurement, and mutilation.

Some things to watch for in this age group are: lack of concentration or day dreaming, changes in behavior, misbehavior, acting out, aggressiveness, obsession about death, withdrawal from friends, mood swings, imitation of the deceased, role confusion, or suicidal thoughts. Children often wish they could visit the deceased, and come back to the living after. They need to have things explained straightforwardly, so they understand the concept of death, and the fact that they cannot visit the deceased.

Late school age children will experience a wide range of emotions after the loss of someone significant in their lives. They will often find it difficult to express these emotions outwardly. One of the first feelings they will probably experience is denial. Faced with more than they can handle, children often step out of the real world into one they find more acceptable. Blocking out the unpleasant is a natural thing for them to try to do. The finality of death is overwhelming and hard for a child to understand. It is difficult to know when the normal period of shock is leading into an unhealthy denial. Simplicity and honesty are the best tactics for talking to the child, it will give them a sense of security.

Anger is another emotion children experience. Anger is normal for griever of all ages. The cause of anger in late school age children is often because they feel it is unfair they should have to suffer the death of someone in their lives. They can also be angry at specific people (the deceased, themselves, the police, parents, medical professionals,

God, Fate, or the world). Anger does not have to be completely logical process. It is an emotional process that can be used as a defense mechanism.

Late school age children often experience frustration when effected by loss because their world is drastically and/or unexpectedly changed. Frustration can be overwhelming and effects their goals, relationships, academic pursuits, financial stability, even to the point where the way the child use to cope with stress no longer works for them. Frustration can arise when: there was no chance to say good-bye, there is unfinished business with the deceased, financial problems come up, parents become overprotective, grades decline because of difficulty focusing, they are denied the truth surrounding death, peers tease child, questions of death go unanswered, changes in school after death, or change in guardian after death.

Some bad ways for a caregiver to deal with a frustrated child are: responding to destructive behavior by telling the child they should not feel a certain way and demanding they stop the behavior, or saying, "You are feeling this way because you are at such and such a stage and you will move on." Sometimes a person doesn't need or want to be fixed only validated. Every one of us at times needs to know that what they feel and doing about their emotions are normal and okay.

During late school age, children understand death is final, but often believe their actions or lack of action may have contributed to the death. Children at this age are trying to gain validation and recognition for achievements, and are basing their behaviors on approval or disapproval. Having someone leave their life can be very confusing and may bring up insecurities that their behavior somehow made this person leave. When to be concerned: if the child suddenly becoming "too good" doing everything they're told, terrified at making a mistake or not wanting to cause anger, experiences anxiety about doing anything wrong because they fear someone else will leave their life, or if the child tries to blame the death on someone else. The child needs to be told the death would have occurred no matter what the child might have done to prevent it.

Late school age children may experience depression or sadness. The signs of depression are similar to adults. Some coping techniques for depression are: Drawing favorite memories, treasuring keepsakes, remembering fun times through photographs, making scrapbooks, and reminiscing about the deceased.

The death of someone close tends to shatter the child's perception that the world is safe and secure. Their emotions can be confusing and overwhelming. Their routines are interrupted and discipline is altered. It is important to reestablish routines and stay constant with discipline so the child feels their world is under control and has boundaries. Some coping techniques for fear are: to identify specific fears, having the child draw what is troubling them, discuss nightmares and have them make up a happy ending, and having the child write their fears on a balloon and release them into the air as a way of letting go of fears metaphorically.

The caregiver should try to help the late school child sublimate their anger/frustration/anxiety in a constructive way. If negative emotions keep coming up because they are failing to meet their goals, break down tasks into manageable steps. They can talk to teachers to get every one informed and on the same page, ask them to maybe do homework with a friend, or include another step by sharing some time together and going out to the real world to see how each step connects together.