

Understanding Grieving Infants and Toddlers

Children under the age of three form loving bonds with those around them, but those bonds are often nonverbal. When an important person dies, infants and toddlers grieve, but it can be hard to see exactly how it is happening.

At [Judi's House/JAG Institute](#), we know signs of grief in infants and toddlers are often physical and emotional, communicated through behavior rather than verbally. With a primary focus on the present moment, infants and toddlers often appear to be doing well, but their grief presents in little bits. They may play normally sometimes and struggle at other times with regulation. If young children are attuned to their caregiver, they are keenly aware of the caregiver's distress, so it is important that adults caring for grieving infants and toddlers take care of themselves and have their own support system in place.

Explaining death

It is difficult to explain death to toddlers. Given their concrete view of the world, it will take time and repetition for a child at this stage to grasp that the person they love is dead and that this means they are not coming back. Using clear, simple, and age-appropriate language will help facilitate this understanding.

Noticing infant and toddler grief

Observing a child's behavior is as important as listening to their words. Since they have a limited vocabulary and lack emotional awareness, their grief will show up through physical actions and body reactions. Physical grief reactions can include frequent tummy or headaches, restlessness, or a lack of appetite and temper tantrums may appear more regularly. Toddlers and infants who once soothed themselves in times of distress may also be more clingy and irritable.

Examples of common grief reactions and ways to support infants and toddlers

- **Young children may be distressed and cry more than usual.** Infants and toddlers often struggle to feel comforted or soothed.
 - Provide physical comfort and stay close by.
- **Small children will process their grief through play.** Play is a way for them to express their grief or find relief from it.
 - Make time and space for independent and mutual play.

- **Some children may have changes in appetite.**
 - It is OK to miss a meal or two or have an extra dessert from time to time. If changes in eating habits result in noticeable weight gain or loss, speak to a counselor and/or a pediatrician.
- **Some young children may struggle with sleep or naptime.**
 - Separation from trusted adults and being alone at bedtime may increase fears and anxiety. Develop consistent, predictable routines around going to sleep and waking up. This may include reading books that reduce worries or rituals that celebrate waking up and the day ahead.
 - Children may associate sleeping with death and therefore develop an increased fear of dying themselves. Be honest and clear in explaining death and how it is not related to being asleep.
- **Toddlers and infants may search for the person who died.** In the first two years of life children develop an awareness that even though an object is hidden, it still exists. They may believe the person has “gone somewhere” and will eventually come back. This again speaks to why using concrete language about death with young children and toddlers is important.
 - Help the child understand that the person cannot return. Avoid describing death as “going away” or “losing someone,” as young children may become fearful when people leave.
- **Children may push away those who care for them. On the other hand, they may become clingy and anxious when someone close is leaving.**
 - Give the child a small personal item that belongs to the trusted adult. Reassure them that all will be reunited and provide them with something to look forward to later in the day (e.g., lunch, naptime, etc.).
 - If a child takes to someone new, it’s not personal. Try to encourage positive interaction.
- **Some children become restless, irritable, or throw tantrums.**
 - Practicing patience with yourself and your child is an important part of the grieving process. Try to create a safe space for your child to express themselves. Taking care of yourself and having personal support available is necessary to give you energy and resources to remain calm when your child is struggling.