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Good grief

Main idea

When death occurs people experience many emotions. This is normal. Jesus understands because he experienced them too.

Questions answered

by this program

- Does God make people die?
- Am I going to die too?
- What's it like when people die?

Bible Base

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2; Ecclesiastes 9:1-12; John 11:1-35

For the leader

When death comes to a family, adults are often so caught up in their grief that the needs of the children in the family are forgotten. At the worst they are totally ignored and this leaves the children confused. Many adults are reluctant to talk with children about the subject of death. Usually the children do not have anyone to sit down with them and explain point by point what has happened. When children can talk about death freely they are more likely to face it in a healthy way.

Teachers and other adults must not interfere with the grieving process by refusing to answer questions, making negative nonverbal responses or using diverting techniques. Children in their simplicity and spontaneity can handle grief far more naturally than adults. If they are not allowed to grieve, serious emotional and relationship problems may occur later in life.

'Life' has gone when someone dies. It will not come back. Death is a part of life. All living things eventually die. (Ecclesiastes 9:2, 5-6, 10-12). At death the body is not needed any more and has to be buried. God know what to do with the life that is gone.

Grief is experienced when the 'life' goes out of any relationship. Divorce, friends moving away, even giving up a loved activity can cause grief but these issues are not specifically tackled in this session.

A story is a good way to approach this topic. *The Cherry Blossom Tree* (Scripture Union), an illustrated story answering young children's questions about death is an excellent one. Ask for it at your local Christian bookshop or Scripture Union in your state or you should be able to find an appropriate story for your group at the local library. *The Very Best of Friends* (M. Wild and J. Vivas), *The Saddest Time* (N. Simon), *I'll Always Love You* (H. Wilhelm) and *Water Bugs and Dragon Flies* (Doris Stickney) are useful.

Children and Grieving is an excellent book from Scripture Union, for adults helping children through this issue.

Open the pack

DEAD OR ALIVE?

Why? To introduce the theme of living and dying.

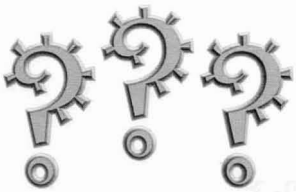
Have a list of 20 people. Read out each one in turn and invite the children to respond by running to one wall if the person is dead or the opposite wall if they are alive. (Alternatively ask them to sit for one and stand for the opposite.)

EVER ALIVE?

Why? Because young children don't naturally understand the difference between living and non living things.

Needed: *A collection of natural objects such as a stone, a nest, a live grub, a pot plant, a leaf and a dead beetle.*

Talk about which items are alive, which were alive and have died and which were never alive.



Dig in

WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

Why? To allow the children to express their response and hear other responses.

Needed: *5 signs*

Being very sad	Being angry	Pretending

Trying to change things	Getting life back to normal

Pose the question:
What does it feel like when someone you know dies?

Briefly talk about how you felt when a person you knew, or your pet, died. Think of a word to describe your feelings.

Ask the children if they can think of a time like that. If not, they might like to imagine how it might feel.

Ask each child in turn to write a word to describe their feelings on a large sheet of paper or white board. If they wish they may 'pass'.

Look at responses together and read them out. Ask if there could be other feelings.

FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

Summarise the five stages explaining that these are stages children and adults normally go through. Put up the appropriate sign as you talk about it.

1. **Being very sad.** Feeling that you don't want to do anything, not able to eat or eating too much. No energy, feeling like giving up, thinking and saying 'if only'...
2. **Being angry.** Angry that the person has died. Angry with God for taking that person away. Asking lots of 'Why' questions.
3. **Pretending.** Not wanting to believe that this has really happened. Some people start to live in a make believe world where they believe that they will wake up tomorrow and the person who died will be back (or their pet will have come home) and everything will be fine again.
4. **Trying to change things by something you do.** Some people pretend to be sick to try to make that person or pet come back. Others act really good for the same reason.
5. **Getting life back to normal.** After the first four stages follows Stage 5 when eventually the person accepts that the death has really happened and it can't be changed and they start getting used to living without them. This can take a long time.

Dig in

IT HAPPENED TO JESUS

Why? So the children will know that Jesus experienced grief, so he understands.

Needed: *Bibles*

Summarise the story of when Jesus' friend Lazarus died *(John 11:1 – 31)* to set the context for what the children will read.

Read John 11:32-35 together.

Chew on it

JESUS UNDERSTANDS

Why? To emphasise the fact that Jesus experienced grief, so he understands.

> ***Pose the questions:***
> *How was Jesus feeling when he heard his friend Lazarus had died?*
> *Why was Jesus crying?*

Close the pack

Death is a part of life. Read Ecclesiastes 3: 1 and 2. God intended for us to live and knew that we would die. Just because we know that we will die one day doesn't mean that we don't feel sad when it happens to people we love.

Jesus felt very sad when his friend died just like we do. He understands how we feel when someone dies or big changes happen in our lives. We can talk to him even when no one else will listen and know that he cares and that he will help us. It is OK to feel sad and OK to cry. When we cry the tears have special chemicals that help us to relax and feel better. God invented tears for us to cry when we feel sad.

Ask a volunteer to pray thanking Jesus that no matter how bad things get, he will never leave us.

An additional activity for a group that is grieving

If you are using this program at school in response to the death of someone known personally to the children in your group, it may be wise to let the school know. Similarly parents of grieving children should be told when you intend to handle this sensitive issue. Such parents could be invited to be present so if the child wishes to discuss it with them, they will know what the child has heard.

Explain that when someone dies it is good to talk about the good memories we have of that person.

Give children a piece of paper and invite them to think about some of their memories of the person or pet who has died. Show them how to divide their paper into 4 or 6 squares and draw a picture, or write about the particular memory.

Ask the children to share their pictures and memories with one other person or with the group but don't force them.

(If children don't have anyone who has died ask them to draw some memories of their pets or grandparents, they would like to remember forever. Alternatively they may like to draw things they have been told about someone who died that they didn't meet, such as a grandparent, aunt or uncle.)