



Information on Grief and loss

Children who have lost someone close to them experience grief over the days and months, and to a lesser degree, the years that follow. Children will show their grief from an early age, but it is likely to be in ways that are different to adults. Children may move in and out of their grief; one day they will seem to be coping well and other days will not be so good. Grief affects children and adolescents in different ways and how it affects them depends on many factors, including their age, family situation, who has died and how unexpected the loss has been. It is important to remember that each child will express their grief differently.

The way that a child grieves is largely affected by their level of development and maturity and by how much they are able to understand about the permanency of death. The adults that are important in a child's life also have a big influence on children's reactions to grief.

Young children may not yet understand that death is permanent and may often wonder and ask repeatedly when their loved one is returning. Older children may become angry or find it difficult to concentrate and perform at school. Adolescents may withdraw or start to engage in risky behaviour. Each child is different and often a child will express their grief through their behaviour, rather than with their words. Sometimes the behaviours of a grieving child may seem demanding or unreasonable, but it is important to remember that children and young people are trying to feel loved, valued and cared for at a time when they are feeling sad, fearful, confused and uncertain about their loss and the world around them.

Making an effort to provide comfort and reassurance and also to maintain a child's normal routines is an important step to help a child or adolescent who is grieving. The routines of home and school life can provide them with a sense of security and control that can be very helpful. It can also reassure them that life continues and that there are others there to help them.

Reactions to grief

Children experience feelings of sadness at all ages and this is the major normal reaction to the loss of a loved one and to other losses.

Other feelings that children may have when someone dies include:

- » **Shock** – this is a common initial reaction to news that a loved one has died. Children may feel that what is happening is not real.
- » **Longing** – this may be accompanied by feelings of yearning, or emptiness and wishes for the person to return, to feel their touch, hear their voice and be comforted by them. Children may continue to yearn for the parent who has died for a long time, and may have fantasies of their return.
- » **Anger** – feelings of anger, protest and 'why me' are common. This anger is often due to feeling 'abandoned'
- » **Guilt** – children may feel guilty about what they said, or what they didn't say or do for the person who has died.

- » **Anxiety** – children may feel very anxious and fearful about life without the person who has died. This may be because of their dependence on the person or because of the feelings of uncertainty brought about by the death. Older children and adolescents may feel especially fearful or anxious because they may feel they are alone and uncertain about the future. Younger children may feel separation anxiety and distress.

Children are often likely to complain about physical feelings they experience following a death. These may include stomach pains, headaches and other bodily aches and pains. These pains usually come and go and may be a real focus for the child.

Other physical reactions that children may have when grieving:

- » **Sleep** disturbances in children and adolescents are very common following a death. Children may have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep due to worries and anxieties about themselves and others, or they may have frightening dreams. They may feel that they need to sleep with a parent or loved one in order to feel 'safe', or to feel that they are keeping others safe.
- » Children may lose their **appetite**.
- » Children are likely to have difficulties focusing their **attention** on schoolwork or other tasks that they were previously able to do.

Some of the **thoughts** that children may have:

- » Children may be **intensely focused** on the lost person and thoughts and images of that person may preoccupy the child as well as the wish for the person to be there.
- » Children may **idealise** the person who has died and see them as 'all good' without any faults, which may be not be accurate. For example "My dad was the best dad and he was never, ever mad with me".
- » Children, especially younger children may think that they are somehow **responsible** for the persons death, or that they could have stopped the persons death.

It is important to keep in mind that children may not always 'show' their grief to the people around them. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are coping well. It may be that the child is finding it difficult to grieve openly and they may be experiencing their grief in different ways. A child's grief may also be delayed and may emerge days or weeks after the loss.

Families and grief

The loss of any member of a family is a crisis and brings grief to the family as a whole. Each family member will have their own way of grieving. Grief is always individual.

Parents and loved ones who are struggling with their own distress and grief and with fulfilling family roles may not be able to respond to the needs of the child. This can make it difficult for children as it may lead to additional feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Family members may also find it very difficult to talk to children about their loss if they too are grieving. It is important the children always feel that they have someone that they are able to talk to, if their parent is not able to.

It is important to understand where a bereaved child's best supports are and help them link to these, both in family and school settings. The continuity of family and school life as well as normal routines and rituals is very important for the grieving child. These routines can help children to feel safe and in control during such a difficult time. It can help children to have a sense of security about every day living and can reassure children and adolescents that the whole world has not collapsed and that there are possibilities for the future.

Children of different ages

How a child experiences grief will partly depend on how fully they can understand the nature and finality of death. How children react also depends on:

- » The level of disruption there is to their lives and worlds
- » The way other family members are grieving and how they are able to respond to the child and their questions
- » who has died and what the child's attachment was to that person
- » who in the family provides for the child's needs and
- » how the deceased was involved in the child's life and care.

Preschool children

Children this age can't really understand the finality of death and may think that the person will return. They will often think that death is temporary and reversible. They may keep asking when their loved one will return or where they have gone. They may even want to go out looking for the person who has died. Children of this age take what you tell them literally, so it is important to think about how you explain the death.

One young boy who was told that his father had died and was now up with the stars, kept running away from home. When asked why he was running away, he told his family that he wanted to go and catch a plane so that he could go up to the stars and find his dad.

Effects of grief at this age are mainly behavioural and may include:

- » Withdrawal – not wanting to play with friends
- » Regression – temporarily reverting to behaviours used at a younger age.
- » Self soothing -such as thumb sucking, using soothers, rocking etc
- » Crying
- » Repetitive questions - often about where the person is, when are they coming back, how did they die
- » Anger, including naughtiness, acting out and attention seeking and temper tantrums
- » Separation anxiety - being clingy and demanding, as they fear being separated and abandoned by those who care for them.

These reactions all indicate the child's need for comforting, particularly with the death of a parent, or someone else they were very close to.

How to help your child:

- » Recognise that they are feeling sad too.
- » Try to maintain their normal routines to the best of your ability.
- » Hold them and talk gently, reassuring them by saying things such as "we all miss mummy"
- » Provide simple information in a calm voice.
- » Recognise that anger may be a child's way of showing their distress.
- » Answer their questions with simple and truthful explanations and help them to remember the person who has been lost.
- » Provide comfort for separation distress and anxiety.
- » Increasing support for parents and others in the family can provide them with more capacity to meet the child's needs.

Infant and primary school children

By the age of 8, children have usually developed the sense that death is permanent. This may lead children to feel more anxious that they themselves may die, or that other loved ones may also die.

A young girl whose grandfather had died was told that he had died as he was old and sick and his body did not work anymore. The little girl became quite worried about other members of the family becoming sick and their bodies not working anymore. The little girl asked her parents about this repeatedly in the weeks, months and year that followed her grandfathers death.

However, primary school children still have a limited ability to express themselves through language and may express their feelings through their behaviour and play.

Primary school aged children may:

- » Frequently ask questions such as “where is (the person who died)?”, “When is he/she coming home?”.
- » Feel that the loss is somehow their fault.
- » Withdraw from friends and family.
- » Act out or misbehave or show some aggression.
- » Not perform as well at school
- » Have difficulties concentrating.

How to help your child:

- » Try to maintain normal routines to the best of your ability.
- » Allow them to ask questions and provide simple, clear and honest answers.
- » Assure them that it was not their fault that the person has died.
- » Be there for them.
- » Acknowledge that grief may be the reason for their change in behaviour.
- » Provide information about normal grief – how it comes and goes and can bring strong feelings.
- » Make sure that they feel valued and cared for
- » Ensure that they are supported at home and at school.
- » Help them to understand that life will go on and they will get through this time with their strengths and with others and that help is there if they need it.

Adolescents

Adolescents are starting to think much more like adults. They have the capacity to understand the nature of death and its finality, but they also understand that they themselves could die.

Young people in this age group also have very strong bonds with their friends and are likely to experience great distress over the deaths of their friends.

Adolescents may:

- » Understand more fully that their lives will be different and that their opportunities and security may be affected, especially by the death of a parent.
- » Feel fearful or angry
- » Be resentful that death has come to their lives
- » Act with bravado, as though they are not affected.
- » Try to take on more responsibility, to look after others

- » Be likely to experience a roller coaster of emotions, with unexpected changes in mood, which may seem demanding and may be perceived as non-supportive by other family members.
- » Be seen as not affected when they appear to be getting on with their lives – which they may struggle with and may bring them feelings of guilt.
- » Act out through risk taking behaviours.

How to help:

- » Adolescents will need a great deal of group support from school and their friendship groups, especially when a friend dies.
- » Adolescents will need the continuity of caring family environments. Affection, security, trust and relationships are central.
- » By providing continuity of caring, engaging school environments
- » Give adolescents information about normal patterns of grief over time
- » Practical and emotional support from peers, teachers or family and friends should be identified as important.
- » Help adolescents to preserve memories through stories, art, songs etc.
- » Activities, roles and actions that are an engagement in ongoing life are important for the adolescent.

Adolescents will be very different from each other in the way they grieve. Some may want to be surrounded by friends and family, whilst others may want to deal with their grief privately. The adolescents readiness to grieve and their ability to 'get on' with the demands of life, school and work will vary from person to person.

While the majority of children are resilient and will be OK over time, research has shown that some children may face mental health difficulties, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complicated grief and other mental health problems. Some children may need specialized support for these difficulties. Understanding and sensitive support are vital for children and young people who experience any losses in their life.



For further information

**Visit the Trauma and Grief Network–
a resource centre for families and carers at**

<http://tgn.anu.edu.au/>