

Helping Children and Teenagers with Grief

Children may react to a loss and show their grief in many different ways as shown below. These are normal ways for children to work through their grief. However if these behaviours become repetitive or last a long time it may be helpful to seek professional advice.

Behaviour

- Playing the same thing over and over
- Crying or giggling without obvious reason
- Playing out the loss with toys
- Anger or aggression to friends, parents or toys
- Temper tantrums
- Copying behaviours of the deceased
- Acting like a younger child
- Acting more like an adult
- Running away, not wanting to go to school
- Problems with school work

Everyone's grief will be different and how they express it may also be different.

Physical

- Pains such as stomach aches or headaches
- Sleeping problems, bad dreams
- Eating problems
- Being clumsy
- Not being able to concentrate for long

Emotional

- Easily upset
- Low self esteem
- Clingy

How You Can Help Your Children with Their Grief

At School

- Advise the school of the death.
- When your child returns to school, talk to the teacher and the school counsellor. Discuss any potential problems such as making gifts for Mother's Day or Father's Day. They will be able to help you monitor how your child is managing.
- Practise with your child what they can say to their friends and teachers. "Many children are more distressed by not knowing the words to say than by the content of what they have to say." (2)
- Remember to involve other people who may be able to help, for example relatives, teacher or school counsellor. Sometimes children, like adults, find it easier to talk to someone outside the family.

At Home

- Maintain routines and expectations such as bedtime, homework and sporting activities. This gives children a sense of consistency and security.
- Birthdays or special occasions may stir up feelings and memories. Include children in the planning of these events.
- Encourage your children to play with friends. Their friends can be an important support.
- Play with your children. Spend some time together doing activities.
- Let your children see your grief. They will learn about grieving from you.
- Don't compare your children or their behaviour to the person who died.
- Seek professional help if you have any questions or concerns.
- In helping children to understand and cope with death remember the following principles:
- Be truthful, be consistent, be loving and accepting.
- Some suggested activities to do with young children
- Create a memory box. Put mementoes of your loved one into a special box and look at them anytime.
- Draw or write about what you might collect to put in your memory box.
- Look at pictures of past good times.
- Read together. Books can encourage understanding and discussion. Two suggestions are: *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* Trevor Romain, free spirit publishing. ISBN 1-57542-055-4, available in public libraries. *Bart Speaks Out, Breaking the Silence on Suicide: An interactive Story for children.* Linda Goldman. ISBN 1-55950-521, available in public libraries..
- Use a toy phone to talk about what happened.
- Use clay to show your thoughts. Pound it if you are angry.

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- Draw or paint to show how you feel.
- You can make a 'feelings' book. Include some things that make you feel safe or loved. Put the date on each page to show how your feelings change as time goes on.
- Act out what happened or how you feel with puppets or dolls.
- Buy a helium balloon. Take it with you to a park or pretty place. Let go of your sad feelings as you let go of the balloon. Watch it float away with your sad feelings.
- Computer programs are useful for story writing.

Should Children Attend the Funeral?

It is helpful for children to have the opportunity to say goodbye to their loved one. For children some simple encouragement can be enough, although they should not be forced to attend.

If children related to the deceased person have chosen to see them to say good-bye, they need to be prepared for the difference in the appearance of the deceased.

Parents may want to use their judgement about very young children viewing the deceased person or attending the funeral. If children want to touch the body they'll need to know it will be cold and won't move when touched, and that the body may look very pale.

It's okay for the child to kiss their loved one good-bye.

If children are very young they'll need to know that the deceased won't respond to their touching or talking, but that it's okay for them to touch and talk to them. This may help children with their grieving.

At a viewing, children may want to investigate every detail. They may be fascinated with stitches, bruises and abrasions and want to touch them. This response is normal and natural; it's a child's way of integrating and making sense of their experience.

Depending on the age of the children, they may need to have it explained that the loved-one won't be coming home but not because they don't like the child or other family members. Children need assurance that they've done nothing wrong and that they are not the reason the person has died.

Very young children are more likely to 'debrief' by acting out their experience in play. They may use dolls, other toys or other children in a game that allows them to re-enact what they've seen, heard or felt.

Most children want to be involved in preparing for the funeral and some children want to be involved in the funeral itself. They may wish to add drawings, letters, poems, toys or special gifts to the coffin, write (in their own hand) the order of service, or read something out loud during the funeral service.

Information for Teenagers

It hurts when someone you love or someone who was important to you dies. The loss and hurt leave you grieving. When you are grieving it can be painful and frightening. It may seem like everything is out of control. It can be helpful to know a bit about grieving. This may make it easier to understand what is happening.

There are many different reactions to grief. Some of these include:

- Anger guilt
- Depression fear
- Confusion sadness
- Feeling unloved
- Loneliness
- Headaches
- Problems sleeping
- Exhaustion
- Dry mouth
- Stomach aches
- Like 'you're going mad'
- Can't concentrate
- Don't want to go out
- Can't be bothered with
- Work or school
- Crying

You may feel some of these – or you may not. You may not know what you are experiencing, it may seem like a time of "nothingness". It's OK to feel this way. Everyone's grief will be different and how they express it may also be different.

Some things that might help when you are grieving:

- Talking
- Being with friends
- Listening to music
- Laughing
- Talking with a counsellor
- Hugging
- Writing down your thoughts
- Praying
- Getting involved with school activities
- Exercising
- Talk with trusted friends
- Tell your friends what you need from them.
- They care about you but they might not know what to say or do.
- Sharing the pain with others helps

Make a list of people you could talk to. This might include your parents, friends, teacher, neighbour, a close friend's parents, doctor, and school chaplain or school psychologist.

When things are feeling overwhelming or you just need to share your thoughts, contact these people.

Drugs and alcohol do not help. Many people take them hoping to ease the pain but they actually make grief more complicated.

Kids Helpline
1800 551 800

Headspace
www.headspace.org.au