

Grief and Loss

Supporting children through bereavement

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How do children react to grief?

Grief is a complex emotional process at any age. The process of learning to live with loss looks different for every individual — children will react differently depending on their personality, age, and developmental stage. Because many children are new to loss, they may grieve deeply for someone they were not particularly close to. It is important to validate this emotional process rather than telling a child to "get over it." Be as patient as possible and watch closely for changes in behaviour and mood.

Signs a child may be struggling with grief

- Changes in sleep or eating patterns.
- Regression to younger behaviours, such as separation anxiety.
- Talking about wanting to be with the person who has died.
- Lack of interest in playing with friends.
- Changes in academic attainment or school behaviour.
- Loss of interest in activities that once excited them.

How death affects a child emotionally

Because children are constantly learning and growing, they may revisit grief several times. A child who has lost someone close may feel sad or nostalgic at different milestones — birthdays, Christmas, parents' evenings. They may also feel shame or embarrassment when enjoying themselves despite their loss.

Children need to know that all of this is normal. They may find positive ways to make meaning out of the loss and feel proud of who they have become — and this does not diminish their grief. Adults can model this kind of meaning-making by sharing their own feelings and memories.

Helping children express their feelings

- Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings. Provide a safe environment for them to express feelings in whatever way they can.
- Help them find ways to express feelings — through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing, or music.
- Allow time to talk, ask questions, and share worries. Children may need to ask the same questions repeatedly as they try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk, open a way in: "Some things are hard to talk about, but talking can really help."
- If you cannot be that person, find someone you both trust — an aunt, uncle, grandparent, or counsellor. Children who cannot talk about the loss may feel it is not safe to do so, and continue to carry muddled or frightening feelings.

Should parents share their own feelings?

Yes — sharing that you are sad too helps children accept their own feelings and understand that grief is a normal part of life. Telling children how you are managing your own grief, even when you are sad, shows them it can be coped with. However, if you are very distressed, it may not be wise to share this fully with children — they need to feel that you are in control and can keep them safe.

Being honest with children about death

Tell children what has happened simply and honestly, in ways suited to their age and development. If you do not tell them, you may prevent them from processing the loss — and this can cause difficulties when they experience loss later in life. Children need to know what has happened even if they do not ask.

Providing routine and support

- Stick to family and school routines as much as possible — familiar structures help children feel safe.
- Make extra time to be with children and teenagers. They will need closeness and comfort.
- If your family has a spiritual belief, this can be a source of support for both children and adults.
- When the time feels right, gently encourage them to move forward and try something new.

Explaining funerals and involving children

Prepare children for what a funeral involves — that it is a chance to remember the person and say goodbye, and what they can expect to see and hear. Be ready to answer their questions honestly.

When a child has lost someone close, having a role in the funeral service or ceremony can help. Sharing emotions and feeling connected to others provides meaningful support. You might also create your own way of remembering the person — making a memory item, releasing balloons, leaving flowers, or planting a tree.

Support organisations

- Grief Encounter: griefencounter.org.uk
- Child Bereavement UK: childbereavementuk.org
- Winston's Wish: winstonswish.org