



# How do you support a child with grief & loss

Dr Tina Rae  
Child Psychologist and Author

## What is grief?

Grief is a complex emotional process for anyone, regardless of their age or stage in life. But exploring the reality of death with a child or teenager can prove particularly challenging.

## How does a child react to grief?

The process of learning to live with the reality of loss looks different for every individual, so children will exhibit different reactions depending on their personality, age, and developmental stage. Because many children are new to loss, you might be surprised when they have a grief reaction to an individual with whom they weren't particularly close. It's important to validate this emotional process, rather than simply advising a child to "get over it."

Be as patient as possible, and look closely for changes in behaviour and mood.

A B C

## What are the behaviours of children who are grieving?

A child might be having a particularly difficult time with the grieving process if they exhibit any of these behaviours:

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

## How does death affect a child emotionally?

Because a child is constantly learning and growing, they might revisit the grief process several times.

- If they've lost a close friend or relative, they might feel sad or nostalgic at different milestones in life, such as birthdays, Christmas, going to parents evening or end of term celebrations, etc.
- They may also experience feelings of shame and embarrassment when they are having a good time and enjoying being with friends despite their loss. They need to know that this all is normal behaviour.
- Though they might find positive ways to gain meaning out of the loss and feel proud of the person they have become, this does not diminish their emotions.
- Adults can model this type of meaning-making by sharing their own feelings and memories.

**We can help a young person through this process in some key ways as follows:**

### How can we help children express their feelings?

- Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings. Provide an environment where they feel safe to express their feelings in whatever way they can. Help them find ways to express their feelings, e.g., through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing or music.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share their worries. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. You may have to answer the same questions over and over as children try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk, you could open the way by saying something like ‘Some things are hard to talk about but talking things through can really help.’
- If you can’t talk about it, find someone you both trust they can talk to, e.g., aunty, uncle, grandparent, or counsellor. If children can’t talk about the loss, they may feel that it is not safe to talk about it and continue to have muddled or scary feelings.

### Should a parent or adult share their feelings?

- Share your feelings and tell children you are sad for their loss too - it helps them accept their feelings if they know others feel the same.
- Telling children how you are managing your feelings, even if you are sad, shows them that grief can be coped with. You will help them understand grief is a normal part of life.
- If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share this too much with children - they need to feel you are in control and can keep them safe.

### Should we be honest with children about death?

- Tell children what has happened simply and honestly in ways that suit their age and development. This helps them find ways to cope.
- If you do not tell children, you may prevent them from dealing with the loss. It may cause problems when they have other losses later in life.
- Children need to know what has happened even if they do not ask.

### Provide routine and support after a death

- Stick to family and school routines as much as you can - doing the same things as usual helps children feel safe. Keep to the same rules about what children are allowed to do.
- Make extra time to spend with children and teenagers - they will need closeness and comfort.
- If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and adults.
- When the time feels right it is obviously important to help them to move on and try something new.

### How do you explain a funeral to a child?



- You are getting together to remember and to say goodbye to the person
- What they might expect at the funeral
- Be prepared to answer their questions honestly

### How to involve children in funerals and ceremonies?

- When children or teenagers have lost someone close it can help to have a role in a funeral service or ceremony, or to remember the person in a special way.
- Sharing emotions and feeling connected with others can be a great support.
- Create your own way of remembering the person, e.g., craft a memory item, release some balloons, leave some flowers or plant a tree.

## Some national charities that give support:

- Grief Encounter: <https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>
- Child Bereavement UK: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>
- Winston's Wish: <https://winstonswish.org/>