australian centre for grief and bereavement

Children Grieve Too

How children grieve

Children may express their reactions to the death openly or not seem to be concerned about the event. Often children grieve in “doses” and may fluctuate between appearing to be unaffected and bouts of expressing grief. They may also hide their own feelings to protect a parent or another family member who may be grieving or distressed.

A child’s level of understanding about death changes over time. They may ask questions about death *e.g. What is death? Death is when the body stops working.* Be aware that they may want to know more about the death as they get older and gain more capacity for understanding. They may raise the subject weeks and months later to check out questions and their feelings, so be prepared to revisit and repeat conversations.

It is also natural for children to process their grief through their play – for example, playing funerals or having themes of death in their play.

Talking to your child about death

Explain death to children as honestly as possible. Tell them the facts in simple terms and in an age-appropriate way e.g. *Mummy has died and will not return*. You may also need to explain that their loved one will not need to eat or breathe anymore.

Telling your child yourself, immediately in an open and direct way will prevent children from accidentally learning about aspects of the event from their social surroundings, which can severely damage the trust they have in parents or adults.

Explain why their loved one died and reassure them that it was not as a result of anything the child(ren) did e.g. *they died because they were very sick or for reasons that we don’t understand.*

Don’t tell the child anything you cannot believe yourself. Statements like “*Daddy has gone to heaven*” or “*Nan went to hospital and hasn’t come home*” or “*Johnny went to sleep*” can be very confusing for children and can lead to unnecessary fears.

Only respond to the questions of the child(ren). Avoid overwhelming them with too much information that may be confusing. Try not to tell children that “*everything is fine*”. This statement does not match the reality of what children are experiencing or observing, which can be confusing. It is better to say things will be fine “*after a while*”

Take time to listen to children, validate their beliefs and opinions about death. Listening to them respects and validates their opinions and beliefs whilst providing a starting point for further conversations. Give them a range of avenues for expression – e.g. drawing, memory book, poetry etc. Make space for expression and discussion about grief and changes. This can be done by:

- Watching videos or reading stories together with themes of change and loss
- Creating a special memorial box or table or garden together

- Keeping a family journal and reviewing it together
- Engaging in any form of creative expression such as those listed above

Help the child to be involved and have informed choice about how and what they get involved in.

Plan for anniversaries, birthdays etc. by talking to your child and let them know what to expect on the day. Remember the importance of rituals, connection and meaning making. Create new rituals and routines together. You could make a collage or memory book, look at family photos and share memories, visit the cemetery, have a cake with candles, or go to a memorial service.

What to expect from bereaved preschool aged children?

Bereaved preschool aged children may experience the following:

- Be greatly affected by the emotions of those around them, especially parents and siblings
- May not stay sad for long – often alternating between crying and playing
- Have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death, and may ask questions that you find confronting
- Become fussy, irritable, withdrawn, or show signs of insecurity
- Have distressing dreams and nightmares
- Regress in behaviour e.g. bed wetting, sleep difficulties or clinging behaviour
- Feel bewildered and physically search for their loved one who has died - adults may do this too

What can help?

It is important for parents and other adults to try to maintain the child's routine. Children need to feel safe, supported and a sense of control. Reassure them that they will not die because their loved one died and that someone will take care of them. Reassure them that they are not to blame for what has happened and that they are safe and much-loved. Comforting, touching, being consistent and talking repeatedly about what happened may be helpful.

One of the best ways to communicate with young children is to sit and play with them. Preschool children have a well-developed imagination. They often play games and incorporate events in their lives, including trauma or death, into their games. Play can be important in helping them make sense of what has happened. By joining in aspects of their play, you can provide them with the opportunity to let you know about their concerns, worries and questions.

Join in play by following their lead - it is the one place that they can be the "boss". The toy box is a good place to start. You can play using fantasy, dress-ups, puppets, dolls, play-doh, clay, paints, woodwork, dancing, music, photography and storybooks.

What to expect from bereaved school aged children?

Bereaved school aged children may experience the following:

- Experience a difficult transition period and want to see death as reversible, but are beginning to see death as final
- Believe that death only happens to other people
- Be very curious about death and burial rituals and ask detailed questions
- Can imagine death as a bogeyman or ghost
- Sometimes play games pretending to die
- Like adults, may be angry over the death and focus their anger at certain people or anyone involved with the death i.e. doctors, nurses, parents
- Be unwilling to express their feelings and keep their grief to themselves
- Take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately

affected by the death
- Can be quick to blame themselves
- Experience disturbed sleep, decrease in appetite or poor school performance and have physical reactions e.g. stomach aches and headaches
- Worry about who will look after them if a parent or other care giver dies
- “Act out” feelings rather than talk about them
- Older children are concerned about what their peers think and might be anxious about being seen as “different”. They may feel isolated, because no one else has had a similar experience.

What can help?

It is still very important to reassure children that they are safe and will be cared for. Have all your children together when breaking bad news. Some will be able to ask questions and others may not. Answer all questions simply and directly and avoid making the death a taboo subject

If you can ask the child(ren) what they are thinking or imagining, this can be helpful in addressing any misunderstandings or unnecessary fears. Talk to them about grief and their feelings – this helps them to learn that their experiences are normal and natural. Be available. They need to be understood and have opportunities to share with others.

It is important to reassure the child that grief is OK. Acknowledge that they are experiencing feelings such as sadness, anger and fear and that you understand those feelings. Allow them to have some time alone. Be open and let them know that you are also experiencing similar feelings and that these feelings are normal and natural.

Reading books with parents is a form of play that many primary school age children enjoy. There are books about death and trauma that can be read with children. Drawing pictures or writing about the event can also be helpful. You can assist the child in developing words to describe their own thoughts and feelings.

Remember to support yourself

Parents have a key role as role models and shape the way other family members will respond - shared tears means shared grief. Parents may be overwhelmed with their own grief and unable to attend to the needs of their children.

Often it is difficult to get through the day, let alone support your children. These may help you to get support from your networks:

- You may need to get support for yourself, before you can help your children. It is important to look after yourself i.e. someone to talk to, physical exercise, massage, writing a journal, creative activities
- Try to maintain a routine and keep things familiar - children can see that life is secure and predictable
- Contact your child’s childcare, kindergarten or teacher and ask for support. Let them know what has happened. If this is too difficult, ask a relative to do this for you. This will help your child get the appropriate support away from home.
- Prepare your child for questions and remarks from others and let them know that it is okay to refuse to answer any questions that are too private or too difficult
- Contact the school counsellor and ask for their support with your child. Possibly set up an appointment with the counsellor once a week for a while
- Find out about a support group for bereaved chidren
- You may be feeling over-protective and fearful about your children. Know that this is a natural response.