

# Grief and loss

Parent easy guide 6



Parenting SA

Growing up is an ongoing process of change that involves losses as well as gains. For children changes such as starting childcare, school, sleeping over at a friend's house, changing classes and teachers, or losing a pet, a friend or a family member all bring new challenges and new learning. Depending on the support children receive and how these early losses are dealt with, children can learn to manage and deal with the losses that will happen throughout their lives.

Children do grieve and this can happen at an early age, but not in the same way that adults grieve. Children are likely to show their grief in less direct ways than adults. Children move in and out of grief. One day they will seem to be fine and another day they will be showing that they are not managing so well.

Children often have more needs at times of loss which can lead to demanding behaviour as they try to get closeness, care, information, reassurance and support from adults. The experience of loss affects each child differently. The child's age, emotional maturity, the circumstances of the loss, and the 'connectedness' with the person or whatever the child has lost are important factors. It is important to look at each child individually and work out what will best help that child.

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*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit your child's or young person's sex.*

Times when children grieve Some of the losses for children are the same as for adults, for example:

- > when a parent dies or goes away
- > when parents separate or a family breaks up
- > loss of a friend or friendship
- > loss of a pet
- > having a disability
- > loss of memories due to fire or flood
- > loss of culture and homeland when moving to a new country
- > death of a grandparent
- > moving house or changing schools
- > long periods of separation from a parent
- > being in hospital

Other times children grieve for something that seems small to adults but is big for children, eg losing their comforter.

## Children's understanding of loss

### Preschool children

In the years before school, children don't understand that death is forever.

They feel grief when they lose someone close to them. The impact of the loss may be greater in the early years because they don't really understand what is happening. They don't understand what is real and what is not real, and they may believe that their own wishes caused the person to go away. Losing someone who cares for them is a major stress that takes time and care to overcome. In a way it is like losing a part of themselves.

Young children don't have the words to express feelings and will show them in the way they act. They may be more clingy and needy or develop problems separating from you. Children can be very kind to others who are unhappy and try to comfort them and then they need to go on playing again.



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## Early years of school

Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent. They begin to realise that when someone dies there is no coming back, but they need to hear what has happened many times over. Some children feel responsible for the death or separation and think it was because they were naughty. They may also be worried about who will look after them, eg if they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well. They may be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death and want lots of information, such as what happens to the body. They may not know what it is they are feeling or know the words to say how they feel, but you will see it in their behaviour and play.

## Later primary school years

Children now understand that death is permanent. They can also understand why death happens, eg illness, accident or old age. They can talk about their feelings better although they might not always do so. They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, eg blame one parent for a divorce.

They have a strong sense of right and wrong and might have strong views about what has happened. They may be interested in life after death and want to know what happens then and ask quite spiritual questions. They may still want to know all the facts about what happens to the body or details of an accident.

As they get older, children are more able to understand what other people are going through as well.

## Teenagers and grief

Teenagers grieve in much the same way as adults but because at this stage of their development they often have emotional 'ups and downs' they can become deeply distressed. Teenagers can be greatly affected by grief following the break-up of relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close to them. They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody. They will probably want to get support and spend time with their friends more than their family. However they still need to know that you are there for them to talk to if needed.

Young people often show sadness through acting out and angry behaviour which covers up their underlying feelings. Some may turn to using drugs or alcohol, driving too fast or doing dangerous things. These young people need lots of support. Others just need to do active and noisy things such as go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends to deal with their strong feelings. Still others seek comfort in music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief.

If your teenager is facing a big loss such as the death of a friend, parent or loved grandparent it may help if he has a task to do at the funeral service or can do something special to remember that person by.

## How children show their grief

Young children especially don't have the words to talk about their feelings in the way that adults do. They may not even really know what they feel. Some of the ways they show grief may be:

- > physical pain such as stomach aches or headaches
- > sleeping problems, bad dreams
- > eating problems, eating too much or too little
- > being destructive
- > acting like a younger child
- > angry play or playing the same thing over and over
- > not being able to concentrate for long
- > problems with school work
- > being easily upset
- > being mean to others
- > 'switching off', acting as if they haven't taken in what has happened
- > acting more like an adult
- > showing fears
- > anger or aggression to friends, parents or toys
- > temper tantrums
- > being unhappy and blaming themselves
- > tending to think the person who has gone is perfect
- > crying and giggling without obvious reason
- > not wanting to separate, clinginess, wanting to be near adults
- > running away, avoiding school, stealing.

## Times of family loss are times of particular stress on children

- > The adults who love them may not be available to support the children if the adults are very upset themselves.
- > There are strange situations to cope with, eg funerals, moving house.
- > The routine of their lives is suddenly changed.
- > People around them act differently, looking sad, crying, not keeping to routines.
- > Children might be asked to be different, eg to be quiet, to be helpful, to be good.
- > They are not sure what to think or do.
- > When a parent dies, children need to feel (with caring acts and words) that they will not be abandoned.

## Special note

Professional help is needed if a child:

- > talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- > seems to be preoccupied with dying
- > is unable to concentrate and is withdrawn at school months later
- > is crying, sad or depressed much of the time
- > is not wanting to join in or play with other children months later.

## What parents can do

- > Provide a safe environment where your child feels able to express feelings in whatever way he can. Help him to find ways to show his feelings through play, water play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting or drawing.
- > Give clear and truthful information to children in a way that they can understand. Don't forget that children need to know what is happening even if they don't ask. Sometimes parents are so busy with their own needs that children can be overlooked. Children may not seem sad when you think they should be, because they still don't really understand what it all really means. This isn't a lack of being sensitive, it is just the stage they are at.
- > Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share worries with a caring adult. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. If you can't talk about it, find another adult who is close to your child who can. If children can't talk to you about the loss, they might feel that it is not safe to talk about it and so continue to have muddled and scary feelings. You may have to answer the same question over and over as your child learns to understand what has happened.
- > If your teenager has had a loss and is acting angrily or withdrawing try to make times available for him to talk, without pushing for answers. If it continues, talk to a health professional about it.
- > Try to open the way if a child feels unable to talk about his feelings. Say something like 'Some things are really hard to talk about, but talking can help. If you ever want to talk about what has happened, let me know'.
- > Be honest. Parents sometimes lie to children because they want to protect them. If you don't tell them what has happened, you may prevent them from dealing with the loss and grieving. This can cause problems when they have other losses in their lives.
- > Stick to as many of the family routines as you can. Too many changes will add further stress. Doing the same things as usual helps children to feel safe.
- > Think about letting your child's teacher or childcare worker know if there has been a big change or loss in your child's life. Teachers and friends at school can help to support your child.
- > Keep some rules about what children are allowed to do. If you think they are taking advantage of the situation you will start to feel angry and that won't help.
- > Share your own grief – don't hide your sadness. Children will feel more normal about their own feelings and feel comforted to know that the feelings they have are in line with those of the rest of the family. If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share feelings with children because it is important that they know that you are in control and can keep them safe.
- > Ceremonies such as funerals can be important ways for children as well as adults to help make sense of the big changes in their lives. Sharing emotions can help people feel connected to others.

- > Get support for yourself. Talk with your partner or a friend. Some agencies offer personal grief counselling.
- > Remember that children grieve in bursts. They have their own individual reactions, and they feel loss just as much as adults but may show it differently.
- > Allow times for extra closeness and comfort.
- > If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and parents.
- > When it feels right, help your child or teenager to move on and try something new.

Note: Children's grief can affect adults personally, especially if they are grieving themselves or if it is a reminder of a past loss. If this happens you need to deal with this. Talking with a supportive person, either a friend or a professional with an understanding of the grieving process, can make a difference.

## Reminders

- > Children grieve in bursts – they don't show their grief in the same way as adults.
- > Keep to family routines as much as you can to give security.
- > Let the teacher or childcare worker know what has happened.
- > Don't rely on your child for support. You need to support your child.
- > Be honest, trustworthy and reliable.
- > Give your grieving child special times with you to talk about feelings.
- > The biggest need for children and teenagers who have a loss is that they are supported and cared for and have someone to talk to about it.
- > If your child or teenager seems to not be managing, seek help.

## Contacts

Parent Helpline: Tel 1300 364 100  
24 hours a day, 7 days a week for advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Centres: Tel 1300 733 606  
9am–4:30pm, Monday to Friday to make an appointment at your local Centre

Kids Helpline: Tel 1800 55 1800

Youth Healthline: Tel 1300 131 719

## Websites

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

For other Parent Easy Guides including:  
Thinking divorce?, Family break-up, After the break-up,  
Dealing with a crisis, Gambling, Adolescent depression

[www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

For parenting and child health information

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## For more information

**Parent Helpline 1300 364 100**

**Parenting SA**  
**Children, Youth and Women's Health Service**  
**Telephone (08) 8303 1660**  
**Internet: [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

**Revised 07/10**

**Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia**

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