

Grief and children

Children can experience grief and loss from a very young age. Like adults, children have their own ways of grieving. It is important to recognise that your child has feelings of grief and to help them express those feelings.

Telling a child about loss and grief

While it can be difficult to talk to a child about death, it is important to be honest with them and help them to understand what has happened. Some suggestions include:

- Tell the truth in a simple, direct way.
- Use concrete words that children know – for example, say 'died' rather than 'passed away'.
- If the child is quite young it may help to use pictures, storybooks, toys and play to explain what has happened and how they feel.
- Explore with children the meaning they may make out of the situation. This can include spiritual and cultural beliefs and practices.
- Children are curious so be prepared for questions and give the child details simply and honestly.
- If you are too distressed to answer your child's questions, ask another adult that you and the child trust to talk to the child.
- Don't pretend that you are not sad – express your feelings to your child. This can help your child feel able to express their own feelings.

Children's reactions to loss and grief

Like adults, children can be deeply affected by loss and grief experiences. While everyone has different ways of grieving, common grief reactions in children include:

- Acting out feelings rather than talking
- Changes in eating, sleeping and behaviour patterns
- Wanting to sleep in bed with an adult
- Displaying younger behaviours such as wetting the bed or sucking their thumb
- Being angry, frustrated and restless
- Lacking concentration and energy at school.

Sharing grief

Even at a very young age, children can sense and experience grief. They will be aware if their parents or other adults are sad or having difficulties with a particular situation. Sharing your feelings of sadness and loss with a child can help them understand why you are sad and see that it is alright to be sad and to express their sadness.

Death can also cause children to worry about their parents or themselves dying. Reassure them that everyone is safe and make sure that they are cared for during times of grief.

It is important to remain open and willing to talk about the various experiences of loss and grief. As children grow and develop, they will have different reactions to grief. A child who doesn't react to, or talk about, a death or significant loss in the early stages may want to talk about it later or may show their interest and feelings in play rather than discussion.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- A trained counsellor
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Tel. (03) 9265 2111 or 1300 664 786
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice 24 hours, 7 days
- Crisis Line Tel. (03) 9329 0300
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800
- Mensline Tel. 1300 78 9978
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- SuicideLine Victoria Tel. 1300 651 251 – for counselling, **crisis intervention, information and referral** (24 hours, 7 days)

Things to remember

- If you are old enough to love, you are old enough to grieve. Even very young children experience grief and loss.
- It is important to recognise children's feelings and speak with them honestly and directly about death and grief.
- Be open and willing to talk with your child about grief and loss.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

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