

## **Understanding of Grief in Children and Young People**

People talk of a grief process, but it is much less tidy than that. How we think and feel will change not just day to day but moment by moment and will also depend on personality and previous life experiences. Understanding a little bit about how children experience, and express grief can be helpful.

When bereavement happens in a family, adults need to care for themselves too and respect their own feelings so supporting other family members through their own grief can be hard.

Children and young people respond in varying ways to trauma, such as bereavement. Nearly all will experience and express some level of distress. This can lead to changes in behaviour as they try to cope with their feelings. These changes might include: separation anxiety (especially in young children), sleep disturbance, nightmares, deep sadness, loneliness, developing new fears, losing interest in normal activities, reduced concentration and achievement at school, anger, irritability and physical complaints. The death of a parent, close family member, a friend, teacher or much-loved pet can have devastating and long lasting implications.

If there are children of different ages, needing different support, this can make the task of supporting them more complex, but shared activities, play and stories can help across ages.

There is a page with creative ideas on the website that you may find helpful. It may be possible within in the social distancing guidelines to access help with very practical things, most communities have a volunteer group to help with shopping for example. There are many organisations who specialise in supporting families with grief and there is a list on the website – although this is not comprehensive.

Do ask for professional support or advice if you feel it would be helpful for you.

Across the spectrum of ages there are no hard boundaries. Teenagers will need some of the same basic help as infants, but each age group has some distinct needs related to their developmental stages.

This is an excellent video where children explain what they would have found helpful to help them process their loss <https://player.vimeo.com/video/167887527>

### **Infants**

Infants know when something is unsettled in their life and are affected by it. They can't verbalise their feelings, but they will be expressed by behaviours. Sleep and eating patterns may change, they may cry more frequently and need more physical comforting, separation anxiety may increase.

#### **What can help?**

Try and keep to their usual routine, and ideally, keep up the contact you have established with people they know well and can respond to, even if that has to be virtually. Aim to keep meal times and bed times free from too many distractions and offer lots of physical affection.

### **Children aged 2-4**

2-4 year olds focus on themselves. They are not able to understand the permanence of death and think it is reversible, "I know Grandma died. Can she come for tea tomorrow?" They may repeat the same questions and will 'puddle jump': being deeply upset and questioning, then bouncing off to play or asking if there is still pizza for tea. There may be some regressive behaviour in their eating, sleeping or toileting patterns. They might be irritable and confused.

### **What can help?**

Patently providing simple, factual information, that does not change. Use the word dead, rather than 'gone away' or 'asleep'. This can cause worry about others 'going away' and can make sleep a huge problem – will they die? Sensory play like sand and playdough will help them explore their feelings and help them to tell their story, for further ideas please see below.

### **Children aged 4-7**

Children at this age have vivid imaginations which do not always separate fantasy and reality. This is accompanied by rapidly developing language. Many in this group will also think death is reversible. They may feel responsible because of their thoughts or behaviour, "It's my fault he died. I was cross with him and wished he would go away". There will be questions: What? Who? How? Why? They may sometimes act as if nothing has happened and there may be general distress and confusion.

### **What can help?**

Provide words to describe some of their feelings such as *numb, grief, sad, angry, heartache, sorrow, cross, lost*. Children understand things very literally so terms like *stroke* or *heart-attack* can be confusing and more explanatory explanations like, *their heart stopped working* may be easier for children to process. Keep explanations simple, but descriptive. If someone dies with Covid 19 it may help to explain that they weren't able to breathe properly anymore or that all the important parts of their body were worn out. Many children will express their feelings through play

### **Children aged 7-11**

By age 7-11 children are beginning to recognise death as final. They want details, sometimes more than seems comfortable to share, but this will stop them imagining worse scenarios. They want to know the "right" way to respond and are starting to have the ability to mourn and understand mourning. They will express grief through their play. They feel different to their peers and may "hang back" socially and educationally.

### **What can help?**

Be willing to talk; encourage the expressing and identifying of feelings, answer questions, explain options and allow for choices. Be available but also allow alone time. Provide physical outlets and affection as appropriate. Support groups can be helpful and so will understanding friends.

### **Young People**

Teenagers understand death more like adults; they are aware of others' feelings but can often find it difficult to put their feelings into words. They may not show their feelings in case they upset others.

### **What can help?**

Be willing to talk; encourage the expressing and identifying of feelings, answer questions, explain options and allow for choices. Be available but also allow alone time. Provide physical outlets and affection as appropriate. Support groups can be helpful and so will understanding friends.