

How Children and Young People Grieve

As concerned adults, we would like to be reassured that children are too young to feel the deep sadness and despair that grief can bring. Sadly, this is not the case. Children and young people grieve just as deeply as adults but they show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by mirroring the responses of the adults around them, and rely on adults to provide them with what they need to support them in their grief.

After the death of her sibling, Meg's father kept himself very busy at work and when he came home started a frenzy of redecorating the house. Meg emulated her father's response by going out a lot.

Children have a limited ability to put feelings, thoughts and memories into words and tend to “act out” with behaviours rather than express themselves verbally. They will gradually acquire the language of feelings by listening to words that you use. Showing your grief will encourage them to express theirs. Their behaviour is your guide as to how they are and this is as true for a very young child as it is for a teenager.

Children are naturally good at dipping in and out of their grief. They can be intensely sad one minute, then suddenly switch to playing happily the next. This apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe children are unaffected, but this “puddle jumping” is a type of in-built safety mechanism that prevents them being overwhelmed by powerful feelings.

As children get older, this instinctive “puddle jumping” becomes harder and teenagers may spend long periods of time in one behaviour or another.

One mother said

“My ten year old doesn't seem to care, she cried on the day because we were crying but she hasn't cried since.”

For a young person, getting on with life might mean a hectic social schedule as their way of shutting out the pain. Or they may withdraw into themselves, rejecting offers of help and being generally very hard to communicate with. If this is the case, try to stick with it and continue to let a teenager know that you are still there for them, but without putting them under pressure to talk.

The difference between adult and child grief is sometimes illustrated by the following: a child jumps in and out of puddles of grief, but an adult is deep in a river, being swept along with the current, finding it very difficult to get out.

Common responses, feelings and behaviours

It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close even if the resulting feelings and behaviours look and feel far from normal. Adolescents and teenagers find it hard to reveal intense and difficult feelings with family members when life for them is already full of challenge and uncertainty. Remember that a child's attention span corresponds to the amount of information they can handle at any one time. When they reach their limit, they may substitute feelings that they can handle for those they cannot. For example, a child may laugh inappropriately to avoid talking about fear or sadness.

This may appear uncaring but is actually a safety mechanism to prevent emotional overload. How a child or young person responds to someone dying will be influenced by their age and understanding, the relationship they had with the person who died, and how that person died.

Age and Understanding

All children are different and a mature 4 year old may have a better grasp of the situation, and of the full meaning of what being dead means, than a child who is older.

An older child generally understands more. The increasing realisation of the full implications of someone dying can be too much to bear, resulting in self-protecting denial and appearing OK. See our information sheet *Children's Understanding of Death at Different Ages* for more information.

Babies and Toddlers

At this age there will be little understanding of what death and dying means but there will be a sense of someone important missing. The resultant feeling of abandonment may create more than usual clingy behavior. With no language to express themselves, their anxiety and insecurity may show itself with inconsolable crying. Feeding and sleeping routines may be disrupted and their distress expressed by being generally miserable.

Toddler to 5 years of age

Understanding will be increasing but so will the need for information to try to make some sense of what has happened, resulting in lots of questions. Anxieties about everyday practicalities are common as is increased separation anxiety even when left for short periods. There may be a regression in behavior, for example with bed wetting, and generally behaving like a younger child. Some children become anxious about the dark when going to sleep. Children of this age find it hard to grasp the permanence of death and can have an expectation of the person returning, with consequent disappointment and sadness. They may struggle with the concept of "no life" and therefore need reassurance that dead people feel nothing and are not in pain.

Primary School Age

Children of this age are beginning to grasp the concept that dead people do not return to life and that death happens to everyone, including themselves. They can start to fear the death of others important to them. Some children react by being especially good to compensate for a sense of badness that somehow what has happened was their fault. Others behave badly to attract the punishment that they feel they deserve. Even when there is no expectation, they sometimes take on the role of carer for a surviving adult or siblings, in an attempt to appear grown up they might take on inappropriate adult responsibilities.

Secondary School Age

Puberty is a time of great change and for a young person, grief just adds to this. Teenagers are striving to be independent and grown-up but the death of someone close creates vulnerability. Their feelings of grief may be similar to those of adults but they have strong inhibitions about expressing them, partly to be grown up, and partly to avoid being different from friends. Some young people become apathetic, depressed and withdrawn and develop a "what's the point" attitude to school or even life. A hectic social life prevents time to think and risk taking behavior or anti-social behavior is not unusual.

None of the above are causes for concern unless they last a long time or affect a child or young person's ability to engage with normal life. If you are unsure or concerned, you can call the **Child Bereavement UK Support and Information line on 01494 568900** for guidance. It is important to remember that grief is normal and with the right help and support, most children and young people will be changed, but not damaged, by what has happened.

The relationship they had with the person who has died

The loss of a parent or prime carer can have a devastating effect on a child. Feelings of insecurity are common and children will be concerned as to “who will look after me now?” This may appear unfeeling but children live in a very concrete world and need to know that they will continue to be cared for. They can also fear that their other parent is going to die and will need lots of reassurance around this.

Following such a loss, children may feel it is their duty to take on the responsibilities of the parent who has died, even when no such expectation is in place. It is just something that some children feel they have to do. This is a heavy burden for them to bear and they will need lots of reassurance that this is neither an expected nor appropriate role for them to take on. In time, everyone will adjust to living life as it has become with new routines.

When a child dies within a family, the remaining brothers and sisters may feel left out as so many emotions are understandably centered on the dead child. Surviving siblings can experience conflicting emotions of deep sadness mixed in with relief that adults might now have some time and energy for them. They subsequently can feel bad for having these thoughts and guilt is common. When a sibling dies, surviving children may wonder why they are alive and their brother or sister is dead. They may fear it is their turn to die next.

A grandparent who was very involved with a child’s care will be probably be missed more than one who was rarely seen, but try not to make assumptions. A death that appears to be not that significant can trigger feelings around other losses.

How the person died

How someone died will affect a child’s response. A sudden death allows no time to prepare for what happens, no opportunity to say goodbye. There is also a feeling of being left suspended, or with unfinished business. When a parent or sibling dies unexpectedly in a road accident, or even more traumatically through murder or suicide, the immediate reaction is shock and total numbness. Young people may feel immense pain at their loss, and anger with the person who has died and left them. Frustration at missing out on planned activities together, which can now never happen, is another response. They may have bitter regrets about something they said, or wish they had said, but never got the chance.

“I didn’t really like Rowan very much and I wish I could tell him now how much I miss him.”

Ruby was age 6 when her older brother died.

Taking into account all of the above, we might assume that an expected death is easier to bear than a sudden one. This is not always the case, they are just different. For children and young people, the death of someone who has been ill for some time can still be a huge shock, especially if they have not been kept aware of the seriousness of the situation.

“We heard a man talking next to us about a young woman who had just died. From that I knew it was my Mum.”

Geoff was age 13 when his Mum died.

Remember we communicate with children all the time, even when we do not intend to. They will already know that something is wrong by the changed behaviour of the adults around them. With an anticipated death, try to take every opportunity to prepare children. Our information sheets *When a Parent is Terminally Ill: supporting children* and *A Guide for the Parents of Terminally Ill Children* may be of help.

Provided with the right support, most grieving children and young people will not need professional help. What they do need is the love and care of adults they trust. It can be helpful to get support from other family members or from concerned adults familiar to the child such as a teacher.

For ideas on how to support a grieving child see our information sheet *What Helps Grieving Children and Young People*.

Suggestions of resources that offer further information

Child Bereavement UK

The Child Bereavement UK website www.childbereavementuk.org has a database that you can search for bereavement support organisations in your area, or telephone the Support and Information Line 01494 568900 for ideas on what might help.

When your partner dies: supporting your children Written with help from bereaved families, this simple booklet offers information and guidance for surviving parents and carers. Only available from Child Bereavement UK. It can be purchased online or ordered by phone.

Cost £2.50

Talking About Death: a dialogue between parent and child by Earl Grollman

A guide for adults and children to read together which helps with words and explanations for some of the questions that children might ask. Available from Amazon.

A Child's Grief - Supporting a child when someone in their family has died.

A useful and easy to read introduction for any adult who is supporting a child through bereavement.

Available from Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk Cost £6.95

A teenage guide to coping with bereavement: a guide for teens and their friends. Only available from Child Bereavement UK.

Cost 50p