



St Leonard's College
An education for life.

Supporting a Grieving Child

Adapted from Michelle Kornberg, Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

Children grieve differently from adults

A child's world is primarily a world of play and imagination. What do they imagine about death?

Children mourn in doses – on and off. They are easily distracted and can be crying one minute and laughing the next.

Children are dependent on those around them – if they are frequently removed from a remaining parent, it may have a negative effect.

Children, and especially teenagers, don't want to be different from their peers. Help them to see they are more alike than different.

A young person's understanding of what has happened and its finality depends on their age, maturity and experiences.

Tasks of mourning

The two key tasks are the same for children as for adults. They are:

1. To experience the pain of grief
2. To accept the reality of the loss



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Common feelings

- Shock and denial
- Guilt – why didn't I? If only I had...?
- Anger – it's not fair; needing to find someone to blame.
- Jealousy – why didn't this happen to him/her?
- Sadness – missing the person
- Anxiety – who will take care of me? How will I cope?
- Mood swings
- Helplessness
- Fear – will this happen to someone else?
- Aloneness – others don't understand what's happening to me
- Relief – when there has been a long illness

Common behaviours

- Withdrawal
- Clingy
- Reluctance to go to school
- Aggressiveness and irritability
- Sleep disturbances, dreams
- Changes in eating and appetite
- Crying
- Verbal attacks
- Bed-wetting

Common thoughts

- Inability to concentrate
- Difficulty making decisions
- Low self-esteem
- Disbelief
- Confusion

Common physical reactions

- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Dizziness
- Pounding or racing heart
- Heaviness of body
- Tightness in chest
- Stomach aches



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Common questions children ask in grief

1. Inevitability – does everyone have to die? Do you have to die? Do I have to die?
2. Unpredictability – when do people die? When will you die? When will I die?
3. Irreversibility – how long do you stay dead after you die? If I did something special to someone who was dead, could they come back? Can you or I come back after we die?
4. Functionality – what do you do all the time when you are dead? Can you see or hear or feel anything when you are dead?
5. Causes – why do people die? What caused X's death? Can people die because someone wished it?
6. What happens – when you die? Where does your soul go? Can they see or hear me or know how I am feeling? Can I talk to them?

Needs of bereaved children

- To have adequate information for their age, development and level of understanding.
- To have their fears and anxieties addressed truthfully.
- To be reassured they are not to blame.
- To be listened to with careful listening, having their feelings understood and validated.
- To be helped with overwhelming feelings.
- To be involved and included in family discussions.
- To have continued routines for stability and security. Normal things happening is a great relief.
- To see that it is OK to cry, to feel sad, to want a hug, to be alone. Adults need to model grieving behaviour.
- To have opportunities to remember and talk about the deceased person.



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Key points to remember:

A child wants to **understand** what has happened. Use the words “death” and “dead”. Tell the truth and answer questions, repeatedly if necessary. A child needs to **express feelings** about what has happened. Listen, accept and care. A child wants to **continue to live fully in the present and open up to the future**. Keep the child safe, maintain standards of discipline – this helps with a sense of predictability and security.

For parents and friends

A death may heighten your awareness of other losses and contribute to your apprehension of your own death or other losses.

Further understanding:

- Admit that you don't know an answer if that is the case. Allow a child to make speculations about information that is not known.
- Children may be over-sensitive to small things for a while – it is a way of releasing their emotions.
- Understand that a child may return to their grief over time as they develop and are able to understand more.
- Make available outlets for the energy of big feelings – sport, play, art.
- Lower expectations in the short term at school and home as grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy.
- Understand that children may regress, act younger when grieving. Be patient.
- Crying helps to express an emotion when we can't find the words, so younger children cry more than older ones who can express their feelings.
- Verbal reassurances go a long way but HUGS can go further!

Grieving takes time and is different for everyone.

There is always someone to talk to if you are concerned that you or someone close to you is experiencing too much difficulty.