

Grief: Assisting children through grief and loss

(Page 1 of 2)

Some of the following considerations and strategies will help parents/ caregivers understand the experiences of children when grief/ loss occurs:

- When children get support from parents and other adults around them, it helps the entire family cope.
- Sometimes children understand death differently than adults and their reactions may be different.
- This tip sheet provides a brief overview of how children grieve and how parents and other caring adults can help them understand the death.
- Suggestions are offered for helping children cope. They are not meant to rush children through grief but rather, give understanding to support their child(ren) to grieve in a healthy and meaningful way.
- The nature of the loss (expected vs. sudden) will impact the way caregivers address the loss.
- When adults experience grief, it is often characterized by sadness and emotional pain.
- For children experiencing grief the most common responses are sadness, confusion, and anxiety.
- One might observe changes in academic performance, attention/ focus/ concentration, irritability, sleep/ eating changes, headaches, stomach problems, social withdrawal, guilt, anxiety, depression and repeated telling of the event/ loss.
- Bereavement takes time and may require some additional support.
- Communication with children about a loss can help them learn that mourning is natural and okay.

Considerations regarding grief/ loss

It is important to remember that grief does not follow a defined pattern or sequence.

Being able to understand some basic concepts about death helps to grieve fully and come to terms with what has happened. Teens and adults may have a full and rational understanding of death, yet can still struggle. For younger children, who may not yet understand the concepts need opportunities to talk about their ideas, thoughts and feelings.

Basic concepts of death:

1. Death is irreversible
2. All life functions end completely at time of death
3. Everything that is alive will eventually die

Often children see characters on television and movies “die” and then come back to life. In real life, this is not going to happen. Children who do not fully understand this concept may view death as a kind of temporary separation. Understanding that death is permanent will then allow for mourning to begin.

Imaginative play with children is natural and appropriate. For example, a child might be feeding their toy/doll believing it to be hungry. When children can correctly identify what living functions are and that they have a heartbeat and need air to breathe, they can understand that these end at time of death. It is important to offer explanations matched to a child’s developmental level and allow for follow-up questions that can highlight any misunderstandings. Additionally, a death of a sibling, or a close friend or sudden death can be more difficult to grieve.

Children who struggle with verbal communication will generally express their feelings in non-verbal ways. When grieving they may show a range of behaviours in response to stress and emotion, including reappearance of challenging behaviours that may have been demonstrated in the past or greater intensity in current ones.

Anger/guilt often occurs due to a person's feeling of powerless-ness over their loss. Questions include: How could they do this to me? How could this happen to someone at our school? Blaming others can also be a common response. It is important to admit the anger, identify the real source of the anger, and understand that it is okay to be angry.

Sadness/depression are evidenced by some or all of the following: crying, isolation, a loss of energy, difficulty with sleep. Allow and encourage expressions of grief. Recording thoughts in a journal can also be very healing. Activity is helpful for depression, although sometimes depression is so deep that even activity seems too difficult. Referral to the family physician is encouraged for depression that persists.

Resolution (accepting the loss)–The question “Why?” is very naturally asked through all stages. The reality of what has happened cannot be changed.

Emphasize that acceptance is not a matter of forgetting the person or minimizing the pain.

Grief: Assisting children through grief and loss

(Page 2 of 2)

If your children get out of bed, lead them calmly back, reassuring them of your presence. Traumatic events and loss increase children's fear of separation from parents. It is normal for children to seek the comfort of their parents' presence. Nightmares provide a way for children to work through their strong emotions.

If your children call to you or cry, acknowledge their fear of separation. Leave a nightlight on and the door open until the child falls asleep.

If your children wake up frightened go to them and provide comfort. Try not to turn on a light or talk in a loud voice. Acknowledge the fear and listen without interruptions. To calm your children, help by differentiating what is real and what is fantasy. Reassure them that you are near and that they are safe. If possible, stay until they are asleep. Allowing children to sleep on a mattress in your bedroom or in another child's room on a temporary basis may help.

Children exposed to a loss or sudden event experience intense feelings, including anxiety and fear. These feelings are very normal responses. They fear injury, death, being separated from family members, being left alone and experiencing a similar loss. These fears are very real to the child and should be accepted at face value by parents. This isn't to say that these reactions won't be upsetting or confusing but remember that reactions which occur as a result of loss are normal.

Children might refuse to go to school, struggle with attendance, inattention, withdrawal from preferred activities or friendships, repeated wish to join the deceased.

Encourage your child to attend school and to resume normal activities as soon as possible. Seek support from your child's teacher, school counsellor or principal/vice principal.

Others want to protect children from pain and sadness. These motives are understandable. Providing children with simple, honest, age-appropriate information, gives them the right to grieve. Crying and other sorts of grief are healing and not a symptom to be controlled. Children should be encouraged to ask questions and respond as they feel.

Explain death in clear terms. Death is a complicated concept and difficult to understand. Speaking in vague terms may lead to incorrect assumptions. For example, a child who is told that a loved family member, "fell asleep" may assume that sleep is a risky behaviour and fear sleeping.

Caring for the caregiver

Grief and loss can have a profound effect far beyond anything this brochure can address. Those in the midst of crisis understand that it is one thing to know helpful ideas; it is quite another issue to practice them. The whirlwind which results from pain and loss can only fully be understood by those in the situation.

In order to take care of yourself, be certain not to put unreasonable demands on yourself by trying to be all things to all people. Expectations and normal daily activities may need to be scaled down. Proper sleep hygiene is essential. Funerals/ memorials- children often benefit from participating in funerals/memorials. Cultural factors are important to consider as each family may have their own cultural/ religious beliefs and rituals pertaining to death of a loved one.

Helping Children Cope:

Talk about the loss, as this gives children permission to talk about it too. Listen to what your child(ren) tell you. Knowing their fears will help you understand the situation. Explain the situation to the best of your ability. Situations which are not understood cause the greatest fear. They may worry about their own safety even if the event traumatic event happened far away. Be prepared to discuss the loss and your feelings about it repeatedly.

- Ask questions and listen. Ask open ended questions will help you learn about your child's understanding of the loss. Give children important facts about death so they understand what it means to be dead.
- Bereavement takes time and is a process.
- Take care of your own emotional health and well-being. Your calm and reassuring influence can support your child.
- Adjust to a world without the deceased. There may be changes in parenting roles, adjusting to a new sense of self, and spiritual adjustments (challenge of one's beliefs and values about the world).
- Routines-Increase time with your child(ren) during the day to help them feel more secure at night. Provide opportunity for exercise and vigorous play to burn off tension and create fatigue. Provide a comforting bedtime routine to contribute to a sense of well-being.
- Seek community/ school resources. School counsellor's can be contacted through your child's school. Community mental health supports and/ or your medical doctor can offer valuable support