

# Children's grief

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*Children grieve in their own way following a death and each child's reaction will depend on the circumstances of their loss.*

*A child's way of grieving can be quite different to an adult's and you may be puzzled by their reactions. Children's grief can rise and be intense at first, then recede and seem to disappear as the child returns to other activities, only to appear again later. Children tend to dip in and out of grief rather than have prolonged periods of grief. As with adults, there is no 'right' way to grieve, and most children find a way to cope with loss. It helps if you give them accurate information and they have a supportive adult to guide them.*

How children respond to death will depend on their age and their understanding of death.

**Children under two:** Babies and toddlers do not understand the concept of death, but they will respond to changes in their family and the loss of someone close to them. They may be extra clingy and need more comfort and physical attention than usual.

**Age two to four:** At this age the child will still struggle with the idea of 'forever'. They may say they know that Daddy is dead and then ask when he is coming home.

They may include death in their play activities, but have little real understanding of the concept of death.

**Age five to nine:** School-age children have a limited understanding of death, but have been exposed to more information about death through television and their friends. They may be curious about death and ask questions about what happens to people when they die. They may also be anxious and fear death, and worry about monsters and devils. You need to reassure them that they did not cause the death.

**Age nine+:** By the age of nine most children understand that death is forever and that it happens to all living things. They may still need to be reminded that when people die they no longer feel pain, cold, lonely, hungry and so on. Young teens will need information about the changes in their life and the impact of the death on their plans.

## What do children need?

After a death in the family, it is normal for you to want to protect yourself and your children from further distress. But it is important to tell children about the death and include them in the grieving of the family.

**Information:** Tell the child what has happened as soon as possible. If possible the person closest to the child should break this news to them. Use simple, clear language. It may seem unkind to use words such as 'dead', but it confuses children if we use phrases such as 'gone to the angels' or 'gone to sleep'. Check back with the child to make sure they understand what they have been told.

**Routines:** Family activities such as meal and bedtimes are often disrupted after a death. As much as possible try to keep up a routine for the child, as familiar activities can help them feel more secure.

**Grief rituals:** Try to include the child in the funeral arrangements and activities. A very young child can make a card. Older children may wish to view the body or have a role in the funeral ceremony. Tell them what to expect and decide how best to include them.

**Expression of feelings:** Let your child know that it is ok to feel all kinds of feelings. Let them know that you too feel sad, angry or fed-up. Let them know who else they can talk to and offer them outlets to express their grief such as drawing, making cards or using puppets.

## How bereaved children react

Your child's reactions will depend on their age and understanding of death, their bond with the person who died, the reactions of other family members and their own personality.

Their reactions to loss may include:

- Sleep disturbance, including nightmares, waking up early, fear of the dark,
- Withdrawal or clingy behaviour,
- Angry outbursts and temper tantrums,
- Overly 'good' behaviour,
- Anxiety - including new fears and asking lots of questions about death,

- Physical upsets - including upset tummy, pains and aches,
- Not wanting to go to school,
- Acting like a younger child - toilet accidents, thumb-sucking.

These symptoms tend to ease over time but may reappear around the time of anniversaries, birthdays or Christmas. Most children are resilient and can adjust to changes in their lives. They settle into new routines but will return to questions about the death as they grow older and need more information. Tell their school about the changes in your child's life.

If their symptoms don't subside over time, you might need to ask your doctor or a counsellor for advice. A small number of children need extra help to process their grief. Signs to look out for include:

- Persistent anxiety,
- Persistent aggression,
- Social withdrawal, lack of interest in friends and activities,
- Self-blame or guilt about the death, believing they are at fault,
- Self-destructive behaviour, hurting themselves or expressing a desire to die or to be with the person who has died.

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*With thanks to Brid Carroll*

