

# Grief and loss



**Growing up is an ongoing process of change for children that involves times of loss as well as times of gain. Changes such as losing a family member, family break-up, moving to a new home, or starting child care or school can bring new feelings, challenges and learning.**

**Children grieve from an early age but not in the same way as adults. They often grieve in bursts and can show their feelings in their behaviour and play. The support they receive at these times helps children learn to manage and deal with losses that will happen throughout their lives.**

## When children grieve

Children can feel grief and loss over the same things as adults, such as:

- serious illness or death of a parent or other loved one
- parents separating or the family breaking up
- the loss of a friend or friendship
- moving house or changing schools
- having a disability, or a parent or sibling with disability
- being ill or in hospital
- the loss of a pet
- the loss of family or culture when moving to a new home
- loss related to sudden crises, such as fire, flood, accident or other community situations.

Children can also grieve over things that seem small to adults but are big to them, eg losing a special toy, comforter or other possession.

## Children's understanding of death and loss

### Preschool children

In the preschool years children don't understand that death is forever. They feel grief when they lose someone close to them. The impact of the loss may be greater because they don't really understand what's happening. They don't understand what is real and what is not real and may think they have caused what happened. They may be more clingy and needy and have trouble separating from you.

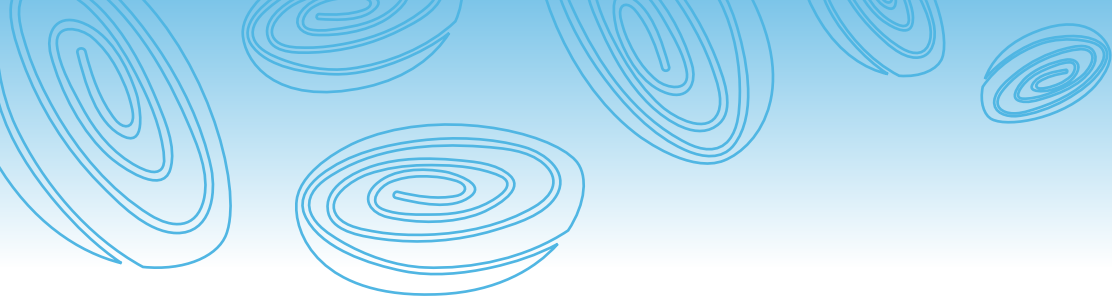
**Losing someone who cares for them is a major stress for children that takes time, love and care to overcome.**

### Early primary school

Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent and to realise that when someone dies they are not coming back. Some children may feel responsible for the death or separation and think it was because of something they did. They may also worry about who will look after them. If they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well.

They may be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death and want lots of information such as what happens to the body. They may need to hear what has happened many times over. They may not know what it is they are feeling or have the words to say how they feel. They may show their feelings in their behaviour and play.

**Children feel grief and loss from a young age. They need your help to deal with their feelings.**



## Upper primary school

Children now understand that death is permanent. They can also understand why death happens, eg because of illness, accident or old age. They can talk about their feelings better although they might not always do so. They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, such as blaming one parent for a divorce. They have a strong sense of right and wrong and might have strong views about what has happened.

They may be interested in life after death and ask questions about it. They may still want to know all the facts about what happens to the body or details of an accident.

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**As they get older, children are more able to understand what other people are going through.**  
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## Teenagers

Teenagers grieve in much the same way as adults. At this stage in their development they often have emotional 'ups and downs' and can become deeply distressed. They can grieve over the break-up of friendships and relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close. They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody. They may want to spend more time with friends than family, but they still need to know you are there to talk to if needed.

Young people often show their sadness through angry behaviours that cover up their underlying feelings. Some may turn to drugs or alcohol, drive too fast or do other dangerous things. These young people need lots of support.

Others just need to be active. They may want to go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends. Some may find comfort in art, music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief.

## How children show grief

Each child experiences loss differently. It can depend on their age, maturity and 'connectedness' with the person or whatever is lost. They can grieve in bursts and seem OK one moment and not the next.

Young children especially don't have the words to talk about their feelings. They may not really know what they feel. Their grief can lead to more demanding behaviour as they try to get closeness, care, information or reassurance from you.

Some of the ways children show grief are:

- physical pain such as tummy aches or headaches
- sleeping problems, bad dreams, wetting the bed
- eating too much or too little
- angry play or playing the same thing over and over
- being aggressive towards parents, friends or toys
- temper tantrums
- being destructive
- being sad, crying, clingy or easily upset
- showing fears, not wanting to be left alone
- acting like a younger child
- acting more like an adult
- problems with school work, poor concentration
- wanting to be left alone or not wanting to talk
- crying or giggling without obvious reason
- 'switching off' and acting as if nothing has happened
- running away, avoiding school, stealing
- taking risks, using alcohol or drugs.

These things are usually temporary and most children and young people will get through it. If it continues your child may need further help.

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**Each child experiences grief and loss differently. It is important to work out what will best help each child.**  
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## Extra stresses for children

There can be extra stress for children when:

- parents or other adults are so upset they are not available to support children
- routines are suddenly changed
- people around them act differently, are upset, crying or not keeping to routines
- there are new situations to cope with, such as funerals or moving house
- they are asked to be different, eg be quiet, be helpful, be good
- they are not really sure what to think or do.

When a parent dies children need to feel they will not be abandoned.

## What parents can do

### Help children express their feelings

- Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings. Provide an environment where they feel safe to express their feelings in whatever way they can.
- Help them find ways to express their feelings, eg through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing or music.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share their worries. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. You may have to answer the same questions over and over as children try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk you could open the way by saying something like 'Some things are hard to talk about but talking things through can really help.'
- If you can't talk about it, find someone you both trust they can talk to, eg aunty, uncle, grandparent, teacher or counsellor. If children can't talk about the loss they may feel that it is not safe to talk about it and continue to have muddled or scary feelings.

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**Let your school or child care centre know what's happening. They can keep an eye on your child and may offer counselling or other support.**  
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### Share your feelings

- Share your feelings and tell children you are sad too. It helps them accept their feelings if they know others feel the same.
- Telling children how you are managing your feelings, even if you are sad, shows them that grief can be coped with. You will help them understand grief is a normal part of life.
- If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share this too much with children. They need to feel you are in control and can keep them safe.

### Be honest

- Tell children what's happened simply and honestly in ways that suit their age and development. This helps them find ways to cope.
- If you don't tell children you may prevent them from dealing with the loss. It may cause problems when they have other losses later in life.
- Children need to know what's happened even if they don't ask.

### Provide routine and support

- Stick to family routines as much as you can. Calm, predictable routines help children feel safe. Keep to the same rules about what children are allowed to do.
- Make extra time to spend with children and teenagers - they will need closeness and comfort.
- If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and adults.
- When the time feels right help your child or teenager to move on and try something new.

### Involve children in funerals and ceremonies

- When children or teenagers have lost someone close it can help to have a role in a funeral service or ceremony, or to remember the person in a special way.
- Sharing emotions and feeling connected with others can be a great support.
- Listen to the child's views and together come up with ways for them to be involved that they are comfortable with.
- You could create your own way of remembering the person, eg plant a tree.



## When your child needs extra help

Seek help from a professional that knows about grief if your child or teenager:

- talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- seems to be preoccupied with death
- is acting angrily, crying, sad or depressed much of the time
- is unable to concentrate or is 'withdrawn' at school months later
- doesn't want to join in or play with other children months later.

**It is important to look after yourself too. Talking with a friend and sharing your feelings can really help. Seek professional help if you need it.**

### Want more information?

#### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

#### Kids Helpline

Phone 1800 55 1800 anytime

A confidential phone and online counselling service for children and young people 5 to 25 years

[www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

#### eheadspace

Phone 1800 650 890, 9am-1am AEST

Free confidential online or phone counselling for young people 12-25 years or their family

<https://headspace.org.au/eheadspace>

#### Headspace

Find information and support for mental health and wellbeing of young people, family and friends.

Find your local centre at <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres>

#### Beyond Blue

Phone 1300 224 636 anytime

Find information about supporting children experiencing grief and loss

<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/healthy-homes/loss-and-grief>

#### ReachOut

Information to help parents support young people up to 25 years deal with everyday troubles or

tough times, including grief and loss [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)

#### Trauma and Grief Network

Information and resources for parents and carers of children and young people affected by

trauma, grief and loss [www.tgn.anu.edu.au](http://www.tgn.anu.edu.au)

#### GriefLink

Information and resources for those experiencing death related grief [www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)

#### Women's and Children's Hospital

Information about children grieving the loss of a sibling, what to expect and what you can do

[www.wch.sa.gov.au/support/grief/grieving\\_children](http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/support/grief/grieving_children)

#### Raising Children Network

Information about raising children [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

#### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Dealing with a crisis', 'Coping skills (resilience)', 'Children's mental health', 'Family break-up' and 'Young people, feelings and depression'

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



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#### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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