

Children and Grief

(Primary School, ages 6–12)



Following the death of someone close, parents are often concerned about how to best support and meet the needs of their children. Like adults, children experience, express and process grief in a variety of ways depending on their age, stage of development, personality, family culture, understanding of death, past experiences of loss and the context of their bereavement. When considering how best to provide support, the child's unique grieving needs should also be considered.

This information sheet is designed to help parents, caregivers and teachers to understand and help primary-school-aged children navigate their grief experience.

A primary-school-aged child's understanding of death

Children of primary school age are beginning to understand the concept that death is permanent, though younger school-aged children may engage in 'magical' thinking, trying to outwit death. Due to a limited understanding of death, primary-school-aged children may also have an increased fear in regards to their own death or feel responsible for the deceased's death.

Talking to primary-school-aged children about death

Although it is natural to want to protect children from hurt or upset, it is important that you take the time to talk and listen to them following the death of someone close. Answer their questions about death in an honest and consistent way without glossing over the truth or minimising the impact of what has happened by saying that 'everything is fine'.

Begin by asking what they already know. Children are more perceptive than we give them credit for, and may already have picked up on and formed their own opinion around what has happened. When explaining the situation to them, it is important that you tell them the facts in a simple and age-appropriate way, e.g. 'Grandma has died and will not return'. Children often take things literally, and saying things like 'Grandma has gone to sleep', or 'Grandma went to hospital and isn't coming home', can be confusing and lead to unnecessary fears, e.g. they may become afraid of going to sleep or visiting hospital.

It is also important to explain why their loved one died, e.g. 'Mark died because his body stopped working, this means he can no longer breathe, eat or feel hot or cold'. This will reassure children that the death wasn't a result of anything they said or did.

Common signs of grief in primary-school-aged children

Children, like adults, will vary in their responses to death and dying; however, there are some common factors that may affect them.

Children of primary school age may:

- experience a difficult transition period, want to see death as reversible and believe death only happens to other people
- be very curious about death and burial rituals and ask detailed questions
- imagine death as a bogeyman or ghost
- play games pretending to die
- be angry over the death and focus their anger at certain people or anyone involved with the death, e.g. doctors, parents
- take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately affected by the death
- be quick to blame themselves
- experience disturbed sleep, decreased appetite, poor school performance or have physical reactions, e.g. headaches

- worry about who will look after them if a parent or other caregiver dies
- take on a parenting role to younger siblings
- ‘act out’ feelings rather than talk about them
- be concerned about what their peers think and might be anxious about being seen as ‘different’
- feel isolated, because no-one else they know has had a similar experience.

Helping children to navigate their grief experience

Listen and talk with them

Children need time and to feel safe in order to express how they are feeling. Be prepared to revisit conversations a number of times, as children need time to process information. Be patient, open, honest and consistent with your responses. Reassure them that grief is normal, and it is okay to be upset about what has happened.

Include them

Include children in decision-making when appropriate; for example, give your child the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in the funeral or any other mourning rituals. Rather than making suggestions, speak with them about their ideas of ways they would like to remember their loved one.

Provide safety and security

Death can threaten a child’s sense of safety and control. It is vital that the child’s physical and emotional needs are met to support them in adapting to the loss. Try to maintain routines and firm, but fair, boundaries as much as possible.

Provide opportunities for expression

Many children respond well to creative outlets, and there are a range of activities that you can do with children to encourage them to process and express their grief, including:

- drawing and painting
- reading and storytelling
- writing poetry or letters to the person who has died
- craft activities, e.g. make a memory box or collage
- music and dance.

Allow for a range of responses to loss

Grief is individual and personal, and accordingly children may grieve in ways that are different to adults, siblings or schoolmates. Some children are more social and verbally expressive, while others are more private and talk less. Some children spend time talking about their feelings, while others manage their grief by doing things.

Provide opportunities for memorialisation and connection

Offer opportunities for them to maintain links to the deceased through memorialisation and connection, e.g. visiting the grave, reflecting on memories and participating in rituals of remembrance.

Support yourself

You won’t be in any position to provide support if you don’t first take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally. If you are struggling, don’t be afraid to ask for help, whether that be through family, friends or health professionals.

Seeking help

With good information, love and support, children can learn to understand and work with their grief. However, if you feel that your child needs more assistance than you can provide, don’t hesitate to seek further help from a health professional.