GRIEVING CHILDREN

Guidelines for adults who care

National Centre For Childhood Grief

Children, like adults, grieve when they lose anything they are attached to – people, places, pets, objects, illusions, a sense of security. Their grief is usually most intense and prolonged when someone they love dies.

Children's grief, particularly the grief of those who are very young, is frequently undetected or misunderstood. This pamphlet has been written to help parents, grandparents, teachers, school counsellors, medical practitioners and others who care, to understand children's needs and where to turn for additional help.

As much as we might wish it otherwise, we cannot prevent children and young people from feeling the pain of loss. What we can do is help them learn how to build life around the empty places in their hearts and teach them skills to manage distressing and intrusive thoughts.

For simplicity, this pamphlet is based around questions most frequently asked when families are facing the impending death of one of their members, after the death occurs or when family security and familiarity is disrupted by separation, divorce, migration or traumatic event.

In this instance, emphasis is placed on grief from bereavement, but it is possible to extrapolate so that answers can be applied to loss from any cause. It is important not to make comparisons – of one kind of loss to another; of the intensity or style of one person's grief to that of another. We all grieve as we have lived and in grief simply become an exaggerated version of all that we were before – children included.

What can we do when someone the child loves is dying?

The bottom line for helping children deal with all distressing life events is **truth** and **inclusion**. It is usually best if truth (eg. diagnosis, prognosis) is given by a medical practitioner in the protective, supportive presence of the child's parent or parents. This is because we all have the tendency to 'behead the messenger'. Parents and others involved in the child's ongoing care are best experienced as the 'goodies' in the situation.

Always ask first "what do you understand about what is happening for your father/mother/sister/brother/grandparent?" You can then build on their response. Truth should always be given in simple, age appropriate language, with permission for the child to ask questions.

Wherever possible, include the child in care of the dying person in ways that help to reduce their feelings of helplessness. For example, giving gentle massage. If they are visiting the person in hospital, prepare them by explaining what they might see, hear and smell, in a simple, non-dramatic manner. They will take cues from adult voices and facial expressions.

After the death occurs, how can we tell if a child is grieving?

It's not always easy. Children may cry initially, or be very subdued and withdrawn. Later, they may cry on the inside and tend to show exaggerated responses to seemingly insignificant events, behave in an attention seeking way or withdraw.

Grieving children and young people, like adults, feel vulnerable and regressed. They may need to do things that reassure them of their ability to survive. For example, playing with friends, acting as if nothing has changed.

They are likely to:

- Act out feelings rather than talk about them – eg. fear, anger and sadness. Sometimes very young children may act out the event that caused the death, details of the funeral, the burial or fantasies about cremation. This is normal and healthy and helps them make sense of what has disrupted their world.
- Experience changes in eating, sleeping and behaviour patterns.
- Want to sleep with an adult – for comfort, and to make sure no one else dies. Although this is understandable in the short term, it's not a good idea in the long term.
- Have difficulty concentrating at school and pre-school.
- Get tired easily.
- Young children may return to bed wetting, thumb sucking or carrying a security blanket or loved toy.
- Talk baby talk and want to be babied.
- Have nightmares or grief dreams.
- Find separations difficult.

How long will they grieve?

That depends largely on the following factors.

- The nature of the relationship the child or young person had with the person who died.
- The nature of the loss – whether it was sudden and traumatic or slow and gentle.
- The age, health and personality of the child.
- The kind of support and understanding the child receives.

If the relationship is one that has been central to the child's sense of self and security, part of them will grieve forever. However, with help, they will learn to build life around their distress so that it doesn't control them or prevent them from living fully.

What do grieving children need?

Most of all they need **to be loved, understood and included** in all aspects of family grief. Their world has changed suddenly from familiar, predictable and safe, to chaotic and fearful. As they learn to accommodate the fact that not all things in life can be controlled, they need some **familiar order** to be restored.

They need to be able to trust parents and other important care givers to tell them the **truth**, in simple, direct language, appropriate for their age. Don't use euphemisms in an attempt to soften facts. Use words like died and dead, rather than lost, passed away or gone to sleep. Children tend to think literally and may fear going to sleep or being lost.

Give children simple biological explanations about death – for example, when you are dead you can't eat, walk, talk or feel. Show them examples in nature. Save complex religious explanations until the child is really old enough to understand.

Heaven is a complex concept. Don't make 'heaven' sound more appealing than life on earth. Don't say mummy, daddy or a sibling is a star. Say something like "when we look at the stars, we will think of mummy, because she is a star in our family."

Answer questions, or if the answers are too painful for you, ask another adult to do so. However, before answering, **always ask the child first** "what do you understand about …" Build on what they already know.

Children need adults to **model how to grieve.** They need to be around adults who are not afraid to show feelings or to label them. For example "I'm feeling sad/angry/worried because …" Reassure the child that strong feelings are okay and don't mean that someone else will die.

Make it possible for children to have **time out from grief** – to be with friends, to play, to be 'in life', but always make sure it is possible for them to change their mind if they suddenly need the security of being near family.

Boundaries and the safety of **familiar rules** help children to feel secure and to believe that the world still has some order in the midst of chaos.

Grief is not an excuse for bad behaviour. Any behaviour that was unacceptable before the death occurred remains unacceptable now.

Respect the child's need for personal space. Don't be alarmed if they become quiet or withdraw to their room. Let them know that it is okay to ask questions or to talk about the person who has died whenever they want, and then let them be.

Some children find it helpful to make signs to hang on their bedroom door. For example, "I need someone to talk to me", "I need to be alone" or "I'm worried".

Encourage children to talk about the person who has died – model natural ways of including them in everyday conversation. For example "daddy would have loved this" or "mummy would feel proud of you" or "Billie would enjoy playing that game with you".

Reminisce together and help each child create their own special memory box rather than one for the whole family if there is more than one child. Every child, every adult, has a different relationship with the person who has died and the specialness of that relationship needs to be honoured. Letters, photos, cards, clothing, jewellery – anything that stimulates a memory can be invaluable for the child to use in the privacy of their room to remind them that people die, but relationship live forever. Retaining and expressing close connection with the person who has died helps most of us learn to live with loss.

Talking about the person who died, looking at photos or compiling a memory box may of course produce tears. At these times it is important to remember that tears are an expression of love, not something to be feared.

Help children **make their room a safe and welcoming space.** They may need a night light, talking books to help them sleep, special photos of the person who died, a piece of their clothing to hold, a memory box or other things that make them feel safe and comforted. Anything that soothes their senses. There may be special smells, sounds or things to touch that give them a warm, secure feeling or that stimulate happy memories. Ask for their ideas about what might help if they are feeling lonely or afraid.

What if children are scared?

It is normal to feel fear when confronted by a new experience. When someone we love dies, especially if the death occurs suddenly, unexpectedly or violently, the child's safe, predictable world changes forever – everything seems chaotic, everything appears to hold the threat of some further disaster.

They may wake distressed from a nightmare or 'grief dream' and all you need to do is ask them to tell you about it, reassure them, then distract with a story if they are very young or something comforting or pleasurable that allows them to go back to sleep.

Some children find drawing their dreams helpful. The drawings don't need interpreting – just ask the child to tell you what everything in the drawing means to them, then do something together if possible that is potentially enjoyable. Dreaming is a natural part of grief – a way of providing focus or putting images to feelings that already exist.

How old should a child be before they attend a 'viewing'?

Whatever age the child is at the time. Adults often try to protect children by not taking them to 'viewings'. It is important to remember that 'viewing' is the word used by funeral directors, but it is really about spending time with someone the child loves or that their parent loves.

Children should never be forced, but should be encouraged by saying something like "Daddy and I are going to spend time with Grandma at the funeral director's and we think it would be a good idea for you to come with us." If they react strongly ask them what they are afraid of. Explain clearly and simply what will happen, and what they will see, just as you would prepare them for any other significant experience. Reassure them that you (or someone you trust who can be their advocate) will be with them at all times.

Provide opportunity for them to talk about the experience afterwards if that seems important for the child, then do something potentially enjoyable to decrease the intensity of the experience.

If you have concerns about the potential effect of this experience for your child, contact The National Centre for Childhood Grief on 1300 654 556 and talk to a counsellor. Alternatively, you can email afriendsplace@me.com or read more about preparing your child in the book ***The Grief of Our Children*** which is available in most libraries or can be purchased via our website www.childhoodgrief.org.au.

Should children attend funerals?

The funeral service is an important 'rite of passage'. It allows families to acknowledge the reality of the death that has occurred and to honour the person who has died. In this way, children can learn that each life is important and valued, and that love and relationships continue with the deceased person even after death.

Funerals also provide an opportunity for friends and family to come together in grief and to feel supported by the wider community. Exclusion from this experience, no matter how loving the reason given, in the long term tends to leave children with feelings of resentment.

Many children like to be involved in planning the service and to have opportunities to place things in or on the coffin. Others don't want to do anything. There is no right or wrong – each child should be able to do what feels best for them at the time.

If they are very young, they may need an advocate to sit with them at the service, an adult whose grief does not prevent them being able to remain child centred. Trusted friends or neighbours can be helpful in this role.

The 'party' afterwards, the wake, seems to be important to many young children. They remember with warmth the presence of people who are an important part of their life and, for once, the uncensored availability of food. The overall warmth of this potentially intense social experience helps them learn that sadness and happiness can co-exist.

How will I know if my child needs counselling?

Their behaviour will tell you. If you, or they, become concerned about extreme changes such as continued angry outbursts, hypersensitivity or withdrawal which does not respond to reassurance, invitations to talk or pleasant distractions, a check-up with an experienced specialist bereavement counsellor can be helpful.

While it is normal for all bereaved children to regress because they feel vulnerable and to have difficulty concentrating, it is also normal for concerned parents and caring others to want reassurance that the child is really doing okay in the circumstances and that they are providing the best possible care.

Where can I find help for my child?

The National Centre for Childhood Grief

Phone	1300 654 556 or 02 9804 6909
Email	afriendsplace@me.com
Website	www.childhoodgrief.org.au

National Association for Loss & Grief
Phone 02 9489 6644

Community Health Centres

CANTEEN – Phone 1800 226 833
Web – www.canteen.org.au

Good Grief – 02 8912 2700

Kids Help Line – 1800 551 800

Rainbows – 02 9524 4346

Are there any books I can read, or books children can read?

Many children find books comforting. They may identify with characters in books and feel reassured that they are not the only grieving children in the world.

For young children ***When Dinosaurs Die*** (Brown & Brown) is a simple and practical way to provide opportunities for discussion.

The Magic of Memories is a CD of 5 real-life stories which can be helpful for parents, teachers and children.

The Grief of Our Children (McKissock) is available in most public libraries and has recently been revised and reprinted.

Reading lists for children and caregivers can be obtained from:

www.openleaves.com.au

www.compassionbooks.com

www.skylight.org.nz

www.childhoodgrief.org.au

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