



## One minute guide

# Understanding childhood grief and supporting children through loss



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### Children's understanding of death and loss

Children's understanding of death and loss evolves throughout childhood. Before the age of five, most children do not understand that death is final, and may ask when the deceased person will return. At this age, children interpret everything literally so it is important to avoid saying that someone who has died is "sleeping" or has "gone away". These explanations can lead to confusion or even fear of sleeping or travelling.

Between five and ten years old, children begin to recognise that death is final and irreversible, however, they may still struggle to understand their own mortality. At this stage, children begin to develop empathy and concern for parents, family or friends who are grieving a loss. By adolescence children begin to fully comprehend the concept of death. With more complete understanding, they may have strong emotional reactions to loss. Adolescents in particular need clear and truthful explanations about the death of a person.

Children who have received age-appropriate explanations about loss from a supportive adult are more able to understand and process this concept.

### Expressing their emotions

Children may initially respond to loss with shock and disbelief. For some, refusing to accept the reality of the loss helps them to avoid strong feelings of sadness and grief. They may not express their emotions straight away and may need time to process loss. Others may respond with anger, guilt, despair or increased anxiety. It is important they are not made to feel guilty about how and when they show their emotions.

Some children show their grief through crying, others may withdraw or try to hide their sadness to avoid worrying others in the family. They may experience a strong sense of longing, including missing practical and emotional support, and this can be more intense when they see someone else enjoying a relationship they have lost. Children can also experience physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches, lack of attention and concentration in school, temporary changes in personality, isolation or withdrawing from friends and family, or a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability.

## Additional considerations

- Children can be impacted by the reactions and emotions of adults around them. It is important that adults express their emotions honestly and openly and encourage children to share their feelings too.
- The loss of a parent has particularly profound consequences for a child. Besides the loss of their main source of love and daily care, such a loss can disrupt the overall stability in the child's life. Older children may take on adult responsibilities such as caring for younger brothers and sisters.
- The death of a child represents a deep shock to the family unit, creating a tense atmosphere that the surviving child must endure. They may experience survivor's guilt. After the loss of a brother or sister, a child's parents may become overly protective or may struggle to keep familiar routines and boundaries.
- Children often form strong emotional bonds with grandparents, and their death can have a significant impact. Children may experience sadness and a desire to see them again. It can evoke fears of losing other loved ones.

## How to support children experiencing loss

Children may need lots of time and space to allow them to process grief and loss. It is essential that parents and professionals communicate openly and honestly with children in an age-appropriate way about what has happened and how they are feeling. Children may need reassurance that they are loved and valued.

It is important to distinguish between the natural grieving process and a traumatic experience. When a loss is sudden, or when a child has witnessed the death of a loved one, the emotional impact may differ from a loss for which the child had opportunity to prepare. Adults should recognise that children need support in processing the traumatic aspects of the event/s and help them make sense of their experiences. When children are not given the opportunity to work through their trauma, it can impact healthy grieving and could lead to further long-term emotional or psychological difficulties. If significant changes in behaviour are noticed, it may be that a child needs help from a mental health professional or therapist who can provide age-appropriate therapy through play, drawing or talking activities. Support groups, overseen by trained professionals, can also be helpful.

Children need a trusted adult to support them; this could be a family member, family friend or an adult in school. These adults should also be supported in managing their own feelings of grief. When children have early experiences of grief or loss and are properly supported, this can help to build resilience. Children and young people should be permitted to take part in ceremonies or attend funerals if appropriate, to help them to say goodbye and collect memories. On anniversaries of the death or during significant family events children often remember the deceased person, making it important to acknowledge their emotions and commemorate the occasion in a meaningful and supportive way.

For further support:

[Home SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE - Grief Encounter](#)  
[Supporting bereaved children and young people | Child Bereavement UK](#)  
[Family Bereavement: How to support children through grief and loss | NSPCC](#)  
[Grief & Loss | Parents Guide To Support | YoungMinds](#)  
[Signs of grief in a child - Cruse Bereavement Support](#)  
[7 tips for helping children cope with grief | Barnardo's](#)



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