

Children and Grief

(Pre-school, ages five and under)



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 and caregivers to understand and help pre-school-age children, i.e. aged five years and under, navigate their grief experience.

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

Pre-school-aged children often find it difficult to understand the finality and irreversibility of death. This understanding often results in terms such as 'death' and 'forever' needing repeated explanations and children may expect the deceased to return. Children may also have questions in regards to the deceased's feelings, e.g. are they hungry?

Talking to pre-school-aged children about death

Although it is natural for parents to want to protect their child from hurt or upset, it is important that you take the time to talk and listen to your children 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'.

A good place to begin is by asking them what they already know. Children are more perceptive than we give them credit for, and they 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'. Young 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 pre-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.

Pre-school-aged children may:

- be greatly affected by the emotions of those around them, especially parents and siblings
- grieve in doses, alternating between displaying grief and playing as if nothing has happened
- have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death, asking confronting questions
- become fussy, irritable, withdrawn, or show signs of insecurity
- have distressing dreams and nightmares
- experience restless sleep
- have changes in their appetite

- have difficulties concentrating or making choices
- feel responsible for the person's death
- act or behave in ways that are younger than they are, e.g. bed wetting, sleep difficulties or clinging behaviour
- feel bewildered and physically search for their loved one who has died.

How can I help my child 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. Just as young children have short attention spans, they also have short feeling spans. They need brief, simple and repeated explanations. Be patient, open, honest and consistent. Reassure them that 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
- craft activities, e.g. make a memory box or collage
- music and dance.

Allow for a range of responses to loss

Younger children may grieve differently than adults, older siblings, or even siblings of a similar age. 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, using the deceased's name, reflecting on memories and participating in rituals of remembrance.

Support yourself

You won't be in any position to support your children 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, your child 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.