

# Children & grief: information for care givers

**Bereavement Service**



Health  
South Western Sydney  
Local Health District



HammondCare  
An independent Christian charity



# A death in the family?

**As adults we may be numb with shock, overwhelmed with sadness, physically overcome by our grief.**

**And then there are the children. It is sometimes difficult to have the energy and patience to meet our own needs as well as our children's.**

Grief may be difficult to experience and understand for adults and can be even more so for children. It is important that they are not overlooked at this difficult and intense time. Children sense the emotion around them, react to body language and overhear conversations. We want to protect our children but it is not helpful to exclude or isolate them by not talking about the death. Children's fantasies can be much worse than reality.

Each child's bereavement may differ depending on a number of factors including the child's age, their life experiences, personality, the circumstances surrounding the death, their relationship with the person who died, and the impact the death has had on other people in their family.

Talking to your child about the death of someone close may be the hardest thing that you have ever done. Yet to keep talking about the person who has died - offering information, sharing memories and stories, and sharing feelings - is one of the most important things you can do to help your child as they journey through grief. They need gentle support and understanding when experiencing a significant loss.

## **The child's response may be different from an adult's**

Although children have the same sorts of feelings as adults, they may show them differently. Children often express their feelings through their behaviour, play and drawings. This tends to be a way for them to make meaning out of what has happened.

Children absorb an understanding about grief slowly and a little at a time. Children's grief can seem to 'come and go'. It is normal for a child to be sad for a little while, then go outside and happily play. They may ask questions over and over. They may hide their feelings to protect loved adults from more pain. Bereavement can bring up the fear of abandonment. Reassure the child that you will be there.

## **What do children understand about death?**

Death can be difficult for children to comprehend. They may be confused by words used by adults to describe events in well-meaning but distressing terms. For example, saying that he or she has fallen asleep or has gone away may result in the child feeling anxious and fearful about falling asleep. Children's understanding of death can be influenced by factors such as their age, cultural and family influences and previous life experiences.

# Developmental understanding and responses

## What can you do?

Children's developmental maturity is important in determining their ability to understand a loss. It is important that you provide simple explanations, answer their questions in a straightforward way, and according to their level of understanding. Try to help them feel involved and loved.

All children and adolescents are different and grieve differently. Their developmental maturity at any given age varies.

The following information is a general guide only.

## Infancy (0-18 months)

### Understanding

A child of this age will have no understanding of the actual event.

### Feelings & behaviours

Infants fear separation. When they sense that adults are upset or their main carer is absent they can become distressed and clingy.

### What can help?

- Babies and toddlers need lots of reassurance from caring adults.
- It is helpful to keep babies and toddlers as calm as possible, to keep routines consistent and avoid having too many unfamiliar adults providing care.
- Getting support for yourself can be important at this time.

## Young children up to six years

### Understanding

Very young children will not understand many of the words spoken about death. They may not be able to understand that death is forever and may ask repeatedly when the person will return. They often do not know the name for what they are feeling.

### Thoughts, feelings & behaviours

Very young children may experience anxiety and may regress to thumb-sucking or bedwetting, being more "clingy" than usual or express anger with toys, playmates and adults. While they will feel and express sadness, they usually do not sustain them for very long. Children may explore their reaction to the death of the person through play. They may also behave as though nothing has happened. This is normal. They just know everything feels different.

### What can help?

- It helps children of these ages to maintain usual routines.
- Help children recognise and name what they are feeling, give lots of reassurance that they are safe and that it is OK to feel sad or frightened.
- It is important that the children understand what has happened and to use words like "dead" even though the child cannot really fully understand what this means.
- It is ok to maintain the same expectations of your child's behaviour while giving extra cuddles and reassurances and being flexible when you or your child need that.
- Talking about the person who has died, sharing stories about your life together, looking at pictures is also helpful.

## Children approximately six to eleven years

### Understanding

Children in this age group understand that death is permanent and they begin to recognise that everyone will die. Younger children in this age group may fear that their thoughts, words and wishes may have caused the death. With increasing age they develop a more realistic understanding of the cause of death and what it means.

### Thoughts, feelings & behaviours

Children of this age may express their pain and frustration through their behaviour and may regress in similar ways to younger children. They may become very curious about the physical side of death, be very matter of fact, and want detailed accounts of what has occurred. They may think that the death is their fault or blame somebody else. This can be confronting for the supporting adults. They often try to comfort their caring adults, may hide their distress or act out at school. These children may not be able to connect how they are feeling with what has happened. Friends are appreciated as someone to do things with but there is also a fear of rejection by these friends.

### What can help?

- Many of the previous suggestions given are also helpful for children of this age group.
- They may find drawing, making and doing things together is a great way to begin talking about difficult concerns and can assist the children to express their feelings and memories.
- These children need detailed information to assist their understanding.

## Teenagers

### Understanding

Teenagers have a fully developed cognitive understanding of death and its impact. However, their emotional maturity is not fully developed. They tend to be focussed on themselves and are experiencing physical changes associated with puberty.

### Thoughts, feelings & behaviours

Like adults, teenagers can have difficulties in talking about their feelings. They can feel that their emotions are out of control, and they can become panicked and anxious. It is important to remember that teenagers are often unpredictable and that their friends and the outside world are most important. Teenagers withdraw from their parents' influence as they try to become more independent and often teenagers prefer to talk to peers rather than family. They can take things very personally and may feel what has happened to them is deeply unfair. Risk taking can be pronounced at this time.

### What can help?

- Teenagers who are grieving need patience and understanding.
- Talking with a teenager may need to occur when they are open to it rather than when you feel it should occur although it is important to still check how they are.
- Teenagers need information about what is happening and keep the channels of communication open; email, post-it notes or text messages can be helpful. Try not to feel hurt if they spend time with or confide in others, rather appreciate that they are talking with someone and getting support.

- Teenagers may still need reassurance to feel safe and may need to be reminded that things will get back to “normal”.
- Try to acknowledge their feelings and experience while recognising there may be some similarities and some differences in the family.
- For some teenagers the death of someone important leads to some dangerous behaviour. Seek help as soon as you feel worried.
- It is important that even if you cannot get them to accept help, you may need it for yourself.

## Helping someone who is grieving

We cannot fix children’s grief but we can be there, share their journey and listen and support them.

Grieving children may need to talk about their loss and acknowledge that they have been through a difficult experience. Others may need to be “left alone” at times and work it out for themselves. Physical and social activities can be helpful distractions for some children. Being there is often all that is needed to support someone who is grieving.

Adults may need or like to seek more information or counselling to assist them in supporting their grieving child.

For more detailed information about how to support a bereaved child or young person we recommend the Winstons Wish website: [winstons wish.org](http://winstonswish.org)



# Specialists in bereavement support for children advise honesty in all communications.

## Talking to children about death

- Talk about the death and what will happen at the funeral.
- Let the child attend the funeral if they want to.
- Talk about the person who has died. Talk about the good and the bad memories.
- Find out what the child is thinking. Ask what the child has heard.
- Give clear, simple, truthful information in words the child can understand. Say “dead”, “died” – not “gone”, “lost”, “sleeping”.
- Be prepared to repeat information.
- Don't give long explanations. Give the facts. Wait for questions and answer them.
- Talk about your feelings. Make sure the child knows your sad feelings are not their fault.
- Reassure the child they will be looked after.
- Make sure the child knows death is not a punishment and is not contagious.
- A hug is always nice!

## Helping the child through grief

- Resume a regular household routine as soon as possible.
- Let the child know they are safe.
- Give the child information about what to expect when grieving.
- Try to understand the child's behaviour. Sometimes they don't have the words to express their grief.
- Remember that misbehaviour may be an expression of the child's grief.
- Offer ways in which the child can “say goodbye”.
- Talk about bad dreams.
- Let them know that they don't have to be ‘brave’.
- Let the child help you in an age appropriate way.
- Together, talk about and look at photographs of the person, who has died.
- Include them in the family's grief. Not knowing what is going on may create anxiety.
- Give the child a memento of the person who has died.
- Let the school know about the death.
- Don't lean on the child for comfort and support.
- Let the child stay a child.
- Encourage them to remain involved in their activities and to speak with someone with whom they feel comfortable.

# Resources for support

## Suggested websites and support groups

### **National Association for Loss & Grief (NALGA)**

P 02 6882 9222

[www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

### **NALAG Grief Support Telephone Service**

P 02 9489 6644 or 0439 922 201

### **Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement**

P 03 9265 2100 or Toll Free 1800 642 066

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

### **Bereavement Care Centre**

P 1300 654 556

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

### **National Centre for Childhood Grief – ‘A Friend’s Place’**

P 1300 654 556

[www.childhoodgrief.org.au](http://www.childhoodgrief.org.au)

### **Compassionate Friends** (for bereaved parents)

P 02 9290 2355 or Toll Free 1800 671 621

[www.thecompassionatefriendsnsw.org.au](http://www.thecompassionatefriendsnsw.org.au)

### **CanTeen – The Organisation for Young People aged 12-24 Living with Cancer**

P 02 9262 1022 or Toll Free 1800 226 833

[www.canteen.org.au](http://www.canteen.org.au)

### **GriefLine**

P 03 9935 7400 or 1300 845 745 (admin)

[www.griefline.org.au](http://www.griefline.org.au)

### **CareSearch**

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

### **Cruse Bereavement Care (UK)**

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

### **Young people living after loss**

[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

### **Winston’s Wish (UK)**

[www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org)

### **The Dougy Center (USA)**

[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

## Contact

### Bereavement counsellor/coordinator

#### **South West Sydney**

Braeside Hospital (Prairiewood)

SWSLHD Palliative Care Service

P 02 9756 8878 or 02 9756 8849

Services can also be provided at a location closer to where you live within the South West Sydney Local Health District

[www.swsld.health.nsw.gov.au/cancer/palliative.html#ber](http://www.swsld.health.nsw.gov.au/cancer/palliative.html#ber)

#### **Southern Highlands Bereavement Care Service** (Bowral)

(A sliding scale of fees applies)

P 02 4862 1701

[www.shbcs.org.au](http://www.shbcs.org.au)

#### **Northern Sydney** (Greenwich Hospital)

P 02 9903 8333

#### **NSW Bereavement Counselling Services Directory**

[www.palliativecarebridge.com.au/resources/25-nsw-bereavement-counselling-services-directory-2018](http://www.palliativecarebridge.com.au/resources/25-nsw-bereavement-counselling-services-directory-2018) [www.palliativecarebridge.com.au](http://www.palliativecarebridge.com.au)

#### **Local social worker or hospital chaplain**

To find a social worker or hospital chaplain contact your local hospital or Community Palliative Care Service.

#### **Lifeline**

13 11 14

*These services are free of charge.*