

Children and Grief

When a child is grieving it is natural to want to support them. Yet, we often feel very uncertain about how best to do so. Perhaps you feel uncomfortable about discussing loss and grief, worried whether your child's behaviour is normal, and unsure what you can do to help. This factsheet offers some guidance for adults (parents, carers, relatives, teachers and others) to help you support a child who is grieving and nurture them to grow through the experience.

What is grief?

Grief is the human response to change and loss in our lives, such as the death of someone we love. It is a natural and normal response, which has a physical impact on our bodies as well affecting our emotions and our thinking. Grief challenges the way we think about ourselves and the world, and influences our spirituality and relationships.

How do children express grief?

Like adults, children express grief in unique and personal ways. This can be influenced by a child's age and understanding of the loss, but also by other factors such as their character, situation or experience. Some children may openly express their hurt, while others may withdraw. Many children also dip in and out of grief, alternating between grieving and more playful behaviour. It is important to remember that grief is a normal and natural response and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Some (not an exhaustive list) of the reactions children may experience:

Emotions that children may feel ...

- May be anxious, fearful, fretful and sad
- May be angry, frustrated or disillusioned
- May try to mask their feelings to 'save' or 'help' adults around them

Thoughts that children may have ...

- May have unrealistic thoughts about their loss
- May try to recreate 'what was' before their loss
- May blame themselves
- May have frightening thoughts or worry about the future

Behaviours that children may show ...

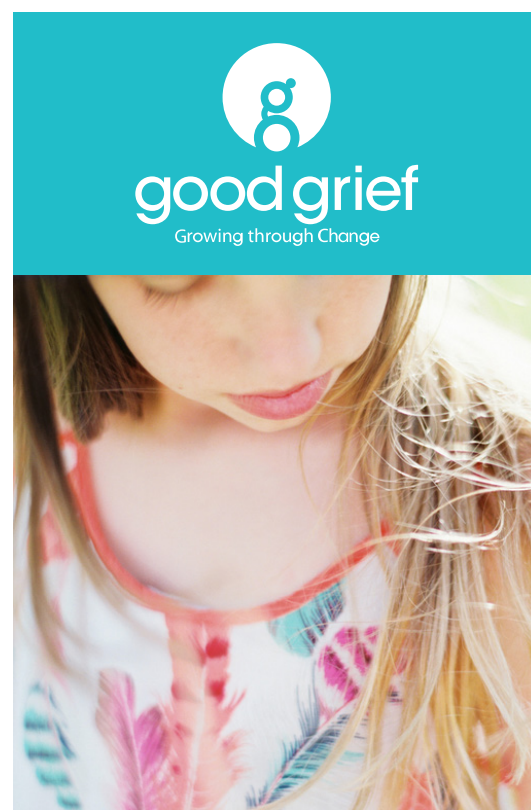
- May regress to younger behaviours
- May 'lash out' at family, friends or teachers or 'act out' in anger
- May be overly clingy or uncooperative
- May try to be overly helpful and cheerful

Physical reactions that children may experience ...

- May be tired, distracted and unable to concentrate
- May have stomach aches and headaches

How to support a grieving child

If we think of grief as a journey, our role as adults is to walk alongside children. We cannot take away the loss a child has experienced and we cannot grieve on their behalf. However, we can help them to understand and navigate the journey and we can hold their hand, encourage and support them when the going gets tough.



What support do children need?

- A strong, loving relationship with a parent or primary caregiver who they can rely upon and trust.
- Clear, factual age-appropriate information about the loss they have experienced.
- Warm, open communication to talk through and make sense of what has happened, repeatedly and without judgement.
- Space to express a wide range of emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour).
- Help to make sense of their emotions and reactions.
- Security from their usual boundaries and routines.
- 'Time out' from their grief, to be allowed to laugh and be playful.
- Opportunities to be involved in decisions linked to their loss.

How to help as a parent or primary caregiver

Grieving children are often being cared for by grieving adults. It is OK for children to see you cry, as long as you explain why you feel sad and continue to support their needs. Two key ways to do this are:

1. Maintain open, warm conversation and notice your child's worries and feelings even if they are different to your own.
2. Try to maintain normal care routines and boundaries as far as possible, such as meal times and house rules. These will help your child feel safe and secure while they navigate their grief.

Don't be afraid to ask other adults to help support your child, or take them out for a fun day, so that you have time to process your own grief too.

How to help as relative, family friend, teacher or other professional

- Let children know their loss is recognised
- Identify yourself as a safe person who is open and willing to listen (although don't force children to talk)
- Help children to identify overwhelming feelings and let them know it is OK to feel sad, angry etc.
- Help them to manage their feelings in different contexts (such as school)
- Check in with children regularly to keep communication open over time

Involving children in decisions at school

Talking with children about new arrangements can be a way of acknowledging their loss without focusing on it directly. For instance, a teacher might ask a child how they would like the teacher to respond to questions from other students, or discuss whether there are any special arrangements that might help them cope in the classroom.



Seasons for Growth is an education program that gently helps children learn about the grief process. It is usually free of charge. It may be beneficial to find out whether your school offers the program.

In addition, if you are supporting a grieving child or young person that is overwhelmed and not coping over an extended period of time, it is a good idea to connect them with some additional professional support.

