

Children and Grief



Change and loss are an inevitable part of life, but some changes can be very challenging (loss of a pet, death of someone they love, parental separation, moving house and school, family illness, to name a few). Children can react in different ways and often we are unsure of how best to respond. This factsheet provides some guidance for adults (parents, carers, relatives, teachers and others) seeking to support a child who is grieving.

What is grief?

Grief is a normal and natural response to the hurt we experience following major change and loss in our lives. It affects our emotions as well as having a physical impact through our whole bodies. It affects how we feel, think and behave as well as how we see ourselves, others and the world around us.

How do children express grief?

Like adults, children experience and express grief in unique and personal ways. This can be influenced by a child's age, life experience, personality, context and available supports, as well as the nature of the attachment to the person or thing they have lost and are missing. Some children may openly express their hurt, while others may withdraw. Many children also dip in and out of their grief, moving between emotional turmoil and the safety and reassurance of routine activities they enjoy. It is important to remember that grief is normal and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Here are some of the reactions children may experience.



Feelings

- 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

- 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

- 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

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

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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.

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), without hurting themselves or others
- help to make sense of their emotions and reactions.
- the security of 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 relative, 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 how they would like them to respond to questions from other students or discuss possible ideas or special arrangements that might help them cope in the classroom.



Further support - Seasons for Growth

Seasons for Growth is an evidence-based education program that gently helps children and young people learn about the grief process. Children and young people benefit from the opportunity to learn how death, family separation, natural disasters or other significant change and loss events may impact on their lives. The Seasons for Growth Program provides an opportunity for participants to learn the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to understand and respond well to such experiences.

The Seasons for Growth Program has four levels to support children and young people aged 6-18 years. All levels have flexibility to cater for participants with different learning needs. The sessions incorporate a range of age-appropriate activities involving drawing, stories, discussion, music and journal activities.

MacKillop Seasons train and support professionals to deliver our small group programs in schools and community organisations.