



Supporting Grieving Children

How Children Grieve

When children lose something precious, such as a close family member, friend or pet, they can feel the loss as acutely as any adult. They will feel the loss and grieve in their own way. Their feelings may be more acute if it is the first time they have experienced a deep loss, like death.

If a child does not display outward signs of distress, don't assume that they are not suffering or grieving. Take the initiative and reassure them they are safe, loved and cared for. Be there for them and respond to their needs consistently. Keeping to predictable routines and behaviour rules lets them know that life is still safe and will continue on in spite of what happened.

Absorbing the impact of the loss and coming to terms with their feelings is challenging. The child may display contrasting emotions, such as laughing, crying, anger or rebellion, all within short periods of time. They may revert to younger behaviours, such as bedwetting or thumb-sucking. They may lose interest in food, sleep poorly or act defiantly at home or at school.

How to Respond

Respond gently, firmly and don't expect too much. They are likely to experience feelings they don't understand and have not learnt how to manage. It is helpful to provide opportunities for them to express their feelings through drawing, painting, music or writing.

Writing letters, poetry or stories can relieve feelings and open up communication. Ask the child what he or she is expressing and allow the child to explain it in his or her own way. Story telling gives the opportunity to open up. Role-model by telling stories and getting the child to join in and then tell her own story. Listen attentively and respond to what she is saying.

Children, especially if very young, may ask a lot of questions, as they try to understand the loss and the meaning and permanency of death. Responding patiently, calmly and truthfully is the best strategy. It is not useful to say that someone is coming back if they are not. Children will only lose trust if they are led astray with stories that they later find to be untrue.

Reassuring grieving children of the value of life in general and their own life in particular helps them to see the event in context rather than in relief. It is part of a whole life story, not something that exists on its own. As well as talking about their own feelings, encourage them to talk about their relationship with and memories of the deceased.

Knowing that the person they have lost is now at peace and without pain will be comforting. It will help children to accept and integrate the event into their own life and life story. For more information on grief, see information sheet [Grief and Loss](#).

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