

# Helping children cope with death

The experience of loss comes to us all at different times in our lives. No-one is immune to loss - from childhood losses like giving up a security blanket to adult losses which may include situations like unemployment, personal disappointments or the death of a loved one.

By experiencing loss, we are placed in a position to gather both inner and outer resources as we learn to adapt to a changed situation. This period of readjustment is called bereavement and our reactions and feelings are termed grief.



So, from childhood onwards, it is important to face loss openly in order to allow healthy attitudes and coping techniques to develop. Otherwise the fears, confusion and unresolved effects of childhood losses may still be present in adulthood.

For parents particularly, it is natural to try to protect children from the harsh realities of life. Death is one of those realities. Be aware though that even from an early age children hear the words 'dead' and 'death' and see dead insects and animals around them. From television they learn that cartoons depict death comically and often as a temporary condition. News broadcasters, on the other hand, may show graphic and violent death scenes. All of the above, however, introduce the idea of death to our children.

When telling a child that someone has died, avoid using confusing words like 'gone', 'lost' or 'sleeping peacefully'. Even the idea of being 'in heaven' can be too abstract for children, leading to the belief that the deceased will one day return from this faraway place and resume normal living. A pre-school child may require only a brief explanation, but it may need to be repeated many times until the information is actually absorbed.

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A simple explanation is relevant - life (eating, breathing, moving) has stopped, the dead person cannot feel anything any more, the body is buried and the dead person cannot come back to life.

Like adults, children will react to the news of death individually and perhaps with unexpected responses. Initially, the child may say it's not true or lash out physically or verbally at the bearer of the sad news. Withdrawal or seeming lack of interest may be another response, perhaps the news is too overwhelming to be taken in all at once. Curiosity and varied questions may be more common with some children than tears and sadness.

However, remember that a child who does not react immediately may do so later and even if the child's feelings about the loss are different to your own, they are not to be denied.

## A Child's Understanding of Death

Age	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Adolescence
<p>Separation and loss can be sensed and appropriate feelings expressed.</p> <p>Explanations probably not helpful.</p>				<p>Death is a temporary condition - child may not seem to be overly upset.</p> <p>The word 'dead' is part of overheard conversations.</p> <p>Dead leaves, flowers, insects and pets are all part of the home environment.</p>			<p>Curiosity about cemeteries and funerals developing.</p> <p>Realisation that they too may die.</p> <p>Interest in physical and biological aspects of death.</p> <p>Realisation that death is final and all living things die. May associate death with skeletons, angels, graves, etc.</p>				<p>Development of philosophical and religious views of life and death.</p> <p>For teenagers, death of another young person can be particularly threatening, as they are beginning to grapple with the many uncertainties of life.</p>	

### When a death occurs in the family...

- Do allow children to take part in farewells like the funeral and viewing the deceased, if they wish. If a child prefers not to be involved, respect that wish to avoid any feelings of guilt.
- When children attend a funeral, prepare them well with clear explanations of the procedures

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and likelihood of seeing emotional people. If possible, have a trusting friend or relative at hand to see to the children's needs or questions if you think you will be too upset to cope with these yourself.

- Do take seriously any fears or anxieties children express, eg "I'm afraid to go to sleep since grandma died". When a child shares sadness, anger, guilt or anxiety, respect these feelings. By taking the time to put down the saucepan or the newspaper you can listen to, accept and encourage the expression of feelings.
- There is no need to hide your own feelings from a child. By saying mummy or daddy is sad/lonely/crying because grandma has died tells your child that he/she too is allowed to have such feelings. They are normal.
- A child's grief may present itself in changed behaviour, ie angry outbursts, bedwetting, separation anxiety, lack of interest in food, day dreaming, being disruptive in school... and more. Punishment is not the answer. Reassurance that the child is still loved, despite the present problems, is more helpful. So are cuddles, hugs, and gentle smiles which communicate love and care.

It is helpful for children to express their feelings through writing, drawing, clay modelling or in their play.

### Listed below are some resources that will further assist you.

#### Books for children

Why did Grandpa Die? A book about Death by B S Hazen (Western Publishing Co)

Something I've Never Felt Before – How Teenagers Cope With Grief  
by Doris Zagdanski (Hill of Content 1990)

Scrapbook of Memories by Earl Grossman (Available free from Harrison Funerals)

#### Books for adults

The Grieving Child: a parent's guide by Helen Fitzgerald (Fireside 1992)

Healing A Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for families, friends and caregivers  
by Alan D Wolfelt PhD (Companion Press 2001)

The Grief of our Children by Dianne McKissock (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1998)

#### Website

[www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)

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