




The Rosemary Branch

Spring 2012



australian centre
for grief and
bereavement



“ Kids are like sponges... they take in a lot more of what is going on around them than adults often realise.”

Allen Jeffress
Kids Grieve Too Support Group Coordinator,
Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

Children and Grief

*Do children grieve?
How do I talk to my kids about death?
Is my child's behaviour normal?
How can I help?*

Following the death of someone close, parents are often concerned about their children's response to the event. Like adults, children grieve in a variety of ways depending on factors such as their age, past experiences of loss and stage of development. “Kids are like sponges,” says Allen Jeffress, Kids Grieve Too Support Group Coordinator at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, “they take in a lot more of what is going on around them than adults often realise. If a child's loved one has died, they will be affected by the loss even if it isn't immediately obvious, or they don't understand what has happened”.

Talking to kids about death

Although it is natural for parents to want to protect their child from hurt or upset,

it is important to take the time to talk and listen to your children following the death of someone close. Answer their questions in an honest and consistent way without glossing over the truth or minimising the impact of what has happened by saying that “everything is fine”.

Tell them the facts in simple terms and in an age-appropriate way, e.g. ‘Grandma has died and will not return’. Children often take things literally, and saying things like ‘Grandma has gone to sleep’ or ‘Grandma went to hospital and isn't coming home’ can be confusing and lead to unnecessary fears, e.g. they may become afraid of going to sleep or going to hospital.

It is also important to explain why their loved one died, e.g. ‘Mark died because he was very sick’. This will reassure children that the death wasn't a result of anything they said or did.

Common signs of grief in children

Children, like adults, will vary in their responses to death and dying, however there are some common factors that may affect them.

Pre-school aged children may:

- Be greatly affected by the emotions of those around them, especially parents and siblings
- Grieve in doses, alternating between displaying grief and playing
- Have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death — asking confronting questions
- Become fussy, irritable, withdrawn, or show signs of insecurity
- Have distressing dreams and nightmares
- Regress in behavior e.g. bed wetting, sleep difficulties or clinging behavior
- Feel bewildered and physically search for their loved one who has died.

School aged children may:

- Experience a difficult transition period and want to see death as reversible
- Be very curious about death and burial rituals and ask detailed questions
- Play games pretending to die
- Be unwilling to express their feelings
- Take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately affected by the death
- Be quick to blame themselves
- Experience disturbed sleep, decreased appetite or poor school performance and have physical reactions e.g. stomach aches and headaches
- 'Act out' feelings rather than talk about them
- Be concerned about what their peers think and might be anxious about being seen as 'different'.

How can I help my child to navigate their grief experience?

Talk to them

Children need time and a safe space to express how they are feeling. Be prepared to revisit conversations a number of times, as children need time to process information. Be patient, open, honest and consistent with your responses. Reassure them that it is ok to be upset about what has happened. Just as children have short attention spans they also have short feeling spans and will often revisit the loss many times over time.

Maintaining routines

Try to maintain routines and firm, but fair, boundaries, as much as possible. This creates a sense of safety and predictability for children.

Set the scene for healthy grieving

The expression of sadness is as natural as the expression of happiness. Model healthy expressions of grief so that children can see that it's ok for them to do the same, or to express their sadness in their own way.

Creative expression

Many children respond well to creative outlets, and there are a range of activities that you can do with your children to encourage them to process and express their grief.

This can be done through:

- Drawing and painting
- Reading and storytelling
- Writing poetry or letters to the person who has died
- Craft activities e.g. make a memory box or a collage
- Music and dance
- Lighting a candle in remembrance

Support groups

Support groups can provide children with an opportunity to be with and talk to other bereaved kids about their feelings around death, funerals and grief. This support can reduce their sense of isolation and help normalise their experience of loss.

Support yourself

You won't be in any position to support your children if you don't first take care of yourself, both physically

and emotionally. However, if you are struggling, don't be afraid to ask for help, whether that be through family, friends or health professionals.

Seeking help

It is normal for children to express a range of emotions and behaviours following the death of someone close. "Children are resilient," says Allen. "With good information, love and support, your child can learn to understand and adapt to their loss. If needed though, please don't hesitate to seek further information and advice from a health professional."

For more information on grief resources and support services for children, please contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on (03) 9265 2100 or go to www.grief.org.au



Common questions relating to children and grief



Should we take our children to the funeral?

Give your children the choice as to whether or not they would like to participate in the funeral or any other mourning rituals. Explain to them exactly what is going to happen, so that if they do choose to go, they are not frightened or confused by the experience.



Our family dog is ill and about to be put down.

What should I tell the kids?

The death of a pet is often the first grief experience a child will have, and as such, is a good opportunity to have an open and honest conversation about death and grieving. Kids can usually tell when something is wrong, so be honest with them. Explain what is

going on using simple and accurate language, and give them the opportunity to say goodbye if they would like to. It may also be helpful following the death, to have some kind of memorial, or ritual activity.



Our son's friend died some months ago.

He seemed fine, but now he's started acting out at school. Is this a delayed grief response or something else?

It may well be a response to the death of his friend, or it may be related to other issues. Like adults, for children grief doesn't have a set timeline. Talk to your son about what happened and give him outlets to express himself — perhaps through art, writing or attending a support group for grieving kids.

Letter from the Director



Welcome to the Spring edition of *The Rosemary Branch*. The last few months have been a busy time at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) due to our relocation to new and larger premises. With significant growth in recent years our new location will enable us to provide a larger scope of programs and services. Our new office has six counselling rooms, which will better enable us to provide grief counselling to more people. It also has free onsite parking and is served by frequent bus services. Please see the back page for our new address and contact details.

This issue of *The Rosemary Branch* looks specifically at the topic of children and grief. Supporting a grieving child can often be a confronting experience for adults. Overcoming our desire to protect children from the adversities of life can be a challenge for caring adults. We hope that this edition of *The Rosemary Branch* will highlight how adults can be powerfully effective companions to grieving children.

In this edition:

- Feature article "Children and Grief"
- ACGB Support Group: Kids Grieve Too (KG2) West
- Your Stories contributions from young people
- Featured resources: Children and Grief

If you would like to add or remove yourself from this mailing list please email us at newsletters@grief.org.au or call (03) 9265 2100. If you would prefer to receive *The Rosemary Branch* via email, please visit our website www.grief.org.au and click the Mailing List icon, to sign up.

Take care, and remember, grief does not discriminate — it affects everyone, no matter what age they are.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Hall, Director, ACGB

ACGB support groups

Support groups are a way of bringing people together in a safe space to share common life experiences. This column looks at the range of bereavement support groups offered by the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, and how you might become involved.



Kids Grieve Too (KG2) West

KG2 West is a support group for children and adolescents, aged 6-14, who have experienced the death of a loved one.

It understands the importance of children and adolescents expressing their grief and loss through a variety of creative ways, and recognises their natural capacity to heal in a supported environment.

The group provides a space for children and adolescents to explore their experience of bereavement and to develop the resilience and resources to adapt to this.

"Belonging and feeling normal is important for kids," says group facilitator, Kaye Griffin. "The groups allows the kids to share their loss and feelings when they are ready, or just listen to someone else talk about their loss. KG2 West provides a safe place

for kids to explore their sadness and grow around their loss at their pace, and in their own way."

KG2 West meets the third Monday of each month, in Sunshine, Victoria. A group for Bereaved Partners runs concurrently, focusing on adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

KG2 groups are also run in Box Hill and Mansfield, and there is a group in Hurstbridge for children affected by the 2009 bushfires. The Centre is also looking to begin two new KG2 groups in the Northern and Southern suburbs of Melbourne in 2013.

To register your interest, or for further information about the KG2 support groups (or other ACGB support groups) call 03 9265 2100 or email support@grief.org.au



Coming Soon... Camp KG2 (Autumn 2013)

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is in the early stages of planning a Kids Grieve Too (KG2) camp for past and current group participants.

Stay tuned for further information!

Your stories

A Dreaded Topic

My name is Shel Abela and I'm 16 years old. The idea for this piece came to me after losing my sister two years ago, as of November 5th, from Cystic Fibrosis. I hope you enjoy my piece.

One topic nobody wants brought up.

One topic even I dread speaking of, but I do. Why? Because it is common in my world. My world of pain, sickness and loss, but also my world of love, laughter, risks and life.

All around me I see people. The world full of different people. Not one the same, similar, but not the same. There are dark people, light people, tan, small, tall, skinny, chubby, straight, bent, ill, healthy, hidden, open, all different people.

In and out of the hospital, monthly sometimes weekly. My sister constantly in for treatment. But not anymore. Now that is quietened. Not silenced, but quietened. From a very young age I had been experiencing death. The loss of hospital friends who had become hospital family, the loss of biological family, friends, pets, farm animals, and even people on my favorite TV show. I was always familiar with death.

But what I don't understand is the fact that people say you know. They say "you know when your time has come." They say you can hold on for that one last family member you need to see, you can see the light.

But many people who have experienced it can see no light. Is there no light because it's not your turn? Or is there no light altogether? Do your memories really flash before your eyes? Do you think about the things you should not have done? And the things you never got the chance to do?

I'm not wanting to find out anytime soon, I just think it would be quite amazing to get in contact with people who have passed over and ask. Sorry to those who don't believe in spirits or ghosts, but this is my belief and I have a right to share it.

I don't always see them, but I can feel their presence, I don't always hear them, but I can feel their touch. Not too long after my sister crossed over, I was downstairs, nobody home, sitting in the computer when I had a thought about my sister. My shoulders went cold and my right arm got goosebumps, I felt a slight touch on my cheek. As if she had planted a kiss, it was the most terrifyingly beautiful experience.

I can talk to her, but she never speaks back, I wish I could hear her voice again. Not a recording, I mean her.

Do different people have different experiences? Or do we all have the same, well depending on the circumstance.

Sudden deaths, such as plane accidents, car accidents, boats sinking, things like that, do you know? Do you know it's your time? I know with people in comas and who are very ill, they know and they can hold on or let go when they need to. Is it the same with sudden death?

The scariest part is, if in 10, 20, 30 years time when or if I find out, I won't be able to tell you. You will have to find out for yourself. And that's the scariest part. I want to be able to share what I experienced, not physically but through a story. And I won't be able to do that. So if and when you find out after many, many, many more years of life. I hope that you can share your story with the people you want to.

Yia Yia 2

Artwork by Matthias Lillis (Age 6)

Article by Judy Lillis, Matthias' Mother

This is the picture that my six-year-old son, Matthias, drew when I asked him to draw a picture about his feelings about his great grandmother (Yia Yia 2) who passed away 15 months ago. Yia Yia is Greek for grandmother. Matthias called my mother in law Yia Yia 1 and her Mum Yia Yia 2.

He had a very close bond with his 91-year-old Yia Yia 2, she was quite a playmate for him. Even though they didn't speak the same language, they could communicate without words. Their faces would light up when they saw each other. She liked to make her special crepes for him to eat.

When I asked Matthias about his picture, this is what he said:



“ I am crying because of my Yia Yia 2. She is dead. I miss her good pancakes and when she played games with me. ”

Drawing has been an important tool in the grieving process for both Matthias and his older brother. Before we went to the hospital to say goodbye and spend what was expected to be the last few hours with Yia Yia 2, both my sons were sobbing and crying hysterically.

After a little while I got out some crayons and papers and told them it might help them to draw what they were feeling. They both used strong colour and motions, drawing away on the page, and then shortly there was calm. It was something that seemed so powerful in that moment — to give expression to their feelings when neither one wanted to, or could, put their extreme sadness and anger into words. It helped us to then be able to spend some precious time with her that evening as a family before she died.

Your Stories is now online!

Want to share your experience of grief with others? Want to read about other people's grief journey? To learn more about how you can contribute, or to read other people's contributions go to www.grief.org.au and click on **Your Stories**.

Join with the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement and help transform the lives of grieving people.



The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement relies heavily on donations for the provision of our services. Donations over \$2 are tax deductible and help support a range

of support services including bereavement counselling, support groups, newsletters, events, education and training.

How to make a donation

1. Fill in this donation slip and return to ACGB via post
2. Visit www.grief.org.au and click 'Make a donation'
3. Call us on 1800 642 066

One off donation

Here is my gift of: \$25 \$50 \$100 \$200
 Other \$ _____ (min \$2)

My cheque / money order payable to the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement is enclosed or, please debit my:

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Signature _____ Expiry ____ / ____

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I will make a regular gift of \$ _____ (min \$10)

I would like to make these payments:

- Every month Every 3 months
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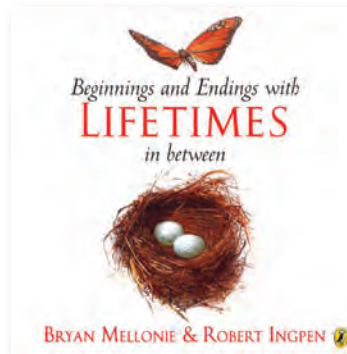
Please send me information about including a gift in my Will to the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

Thank you

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Featured Resources

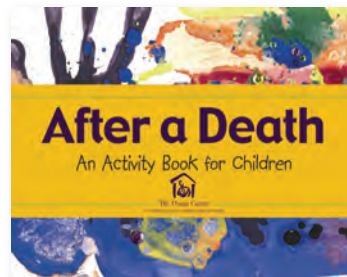


Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes in Between

Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen
\$18.50

A beautifully illustrated picture book which has proven a powerful tool for explaining the nature of death to

children in a gentle, informative and non-threatening way. It also addresses illness and injury as part of life. A classic for all ages, but especially for children aged 4-12 years.

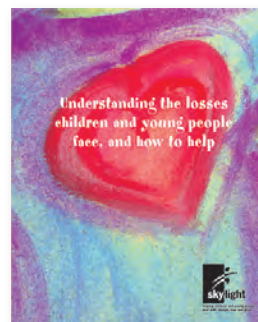


After a Death: An Activity Book for Children

The Dougy Centre
\$22.95

This easy-to-use workbook is designed for children aged 5-12 who have experienced

the death of a family member or friend. With a mixture of creative activities and tips for dealing with changes at school, home and with friends, this is a great tool for all grieving children. It includes a variety of drawing and writing exercises to help children remember the person who died, and learn new ways to live with the loss.



Understanding the Losses Children and Young People Face, and How to Help

Skylight, NZ
\$6.50

This Skylight booklet features important information for adults wanting to better understand and

support children and teens who are grieving – whatever the cause. Practical and easy to dip into, it is designed to be used by families and professionals alike.

These books, along with a range of other useful resources, can be purchased from the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.

Visit www.grief.org.au/resources to download a resource guide/order form, or call 1800 642 066.

CUT ALONG THIS DOTTED LINE





Our Services

The Rosemary Branch

For all enquiries about *The Rosemary Branch*, please contact the Centre on 03 9265 2100 or email newsletters@grief.org.au to subscribe to our mailing list. To download a PDF version of current and past editions, or to receive *The Rosemary Branch* as an e-newsletter go to www.grief.org.au

Bereavement Counselling and Support Service

The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) operates a statewide Specialist Bereavement Counselling and Support Service for Victoria. This program is funded by the Victorian Government Department of Health and has counsellors located across metropolitan Melbourne, in regional areas (Grampians, Gippsland, Hume, Barwon South-West, and Loddon Mallee), and in areas affected by the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. For further information, call 03 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Support Groups

ACGB operates a range of support groups including groups for adults, children, bereaved partners, death of a parent and many more. For further information call 03 9265 2100, or email support@grief.org.au

Lending Library

The Lending Library is a portable collection of books about grief and loss. The books cover a wide range of topics and cater for all age groups. For more information, contact Rae Silverstein on 03 9265 2100 or email r.silverstein@grief.org.au

Volunteering

Would you like to contribute to the work of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement as a volunteer? Contact us on 03 9265 2100, or email info@grief.org.au

Ceremony of Remembrance

The Ceremony of Remembrance is held each year. Information is sent to current and previous clients of the Centre who are on our mailing list prior to the event. For further information call 03 9265 2100, or email counselling@grief.org.au

Better Health Channel



ACGB is a content partner with the Better Health Channel. Better Health Channel provides health and medical information that is quality assured, reliable, up to date, easy to understand, regularly reviewed and locally relevant. For more information, go to www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Healthshare



Healthshare is an Australian national health initiative designed to provide better access to health expertise and improve the quality of health information online. ACGB is a content provider within Healthshare's online bereavement support community. Users can post questions or share experiences with others. ACGB staff regularly answer questions posted by the community. For more information, go to www.healthshare.com.au

We value your feedback

If you have feedback about *The Rosemary Branch*, the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Counselling and Support Service, or any of the services we deliver, we would love to hear from you. Contact us on 03 9265 2100 or email info@grief.org.au

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