

Understanding and supporting preschool-age children who have experienced grief and loss

This fact sheet provides helpful information and strategies to assist parents and carers in providing the vital support that children need as they experience grief and loss.

What are grief and loss?

Children experience grief and loss as a normal part of life. Loss is when something ends (you or your child has 'lost' something or someone). Loss can mean the death of a family member or friend, or member of the community. It can mean the loss of a pet, or a relationship (e.g. divorce or separation) or even moving house. It can be a psychological loss as well, such as the loss of feeling safe (e.g. due to bushfires or floods, or experiences of violence).

Grief is the emotional response to these types of losses, and may include feelings of anger, sadness or anxiety. Grief, and the emotions that accompany it are a natural, though difficult process.



A child's experience of grief will partly depend on how fully they can understand the nature of the loss, such as the finality of a death, or the impacts of losing a home in a disaster.

How children react also depends on:

- the level of disruption there is to their lives and environment
- the way other family members are coping, and how they are able to respond to the child and their questions
- if someone has died: how close the child felt to that person, and how involved they were in the child's life and care
- the child's other experiences of loss or adversity.

Responses to grief and loss

"My son Ben was four when his father passed away. I told him that his dad was now up with the stars and whenever he missed him, he could just look up at the sky. Shortly after this, Ben started trying to leave the house and once, to my horror I found him walking alone down the street. When I asked why he was doing this he told me he was trying to go to the airport so that he could go up to the stars and find his dad."

Preschool-age children can't really understand the finality of death and may think that the person will return. They will often think that death is temporary and reversible. They may keep asking when their loved one will come back or where they have gone. They may even want to go out looking for the person who has died. Children of this age take what you tell them literally, so it is important to think about how you explain the death.

The effects of grief at this age are mainly behavioural and may include:

- withdrawing – not wanting to play with friends
- regression – going back for a short time to behaviours used at a younger age

This resource was co-produced with:



The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program. The NWC is led by Emerging Minds and is delivered in partnership with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), the Parenting Research Centre (PRC), the Australian National University (ANU) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP).

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February 2020

- self-soothing – such as thumb-sucking, using dummies, rocking, etc.
- crying
- asking repetitive questions – often about where the person is, when they are coming back, and how they died
- anger – including defiance, acting out, aggression or temper tantrums
- separation anxiety – being clingy and difficult to settle, or calm, as they fear being separated and abandoned by those who care for them.

These reactions all show the child's need for comfort, particularly following the death of a parent or someone else they were very close to.

How to support a child experiencing grief or loss

- Recognise that they are feeling sad too, even though their behaviour may not always make this clear.
- Remember, children's moods can change very quickly. They may be extremely sad one moment, and be running off to play the next – this doesn't mean they are not still upset.
- Try to maintain normal routines to the best of your ability.
- Hold them and talk gently, reassuring them by saying things such as, "we are all feeling a bit sad at the moment, but I'm here to look after you".
- Provide simple information about the loss in a calm voice.
- Recognise that anger may be a child's way of showing their distress.
- Answer their questions with simple and truthful explanations, but without graphic or violent details.
- Help them to remember the person who has been lost.
- Provide comfort for separation distress and anxiety.



How should I talk to my preschooler about death?

- Preschool-age children may see death as a temporary, reversible state. Let them know that the person's life is over now, and they will not be able to visit them anymore.
- Gently explain that the person's body doesn't work well enough for them to live in it, like they used to.
- Validate the sadness or other feelings your child expresses, encouraging them to come to you if they need a hug or want to talk about the person they are missing.

The majority of children are resilient and with the right support, they will work through their emotions of grief and loss and be OK. However, if these emotions and feelings are persisting and causing you concern, you should seek additional support from your GP.

For information on supporting older children experiencing grief and loss, view the fact sheet:

[Understanding and supporting primary school-age children who have experienced grief and loss](#)

For more resources on grief and loss in children, visit: emergingminds.com.au

Helping parents and others in the family with practical support can help them have more capacity to meet children's needs.

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