

## Understanding and supporting primary school-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.



This resource was co-produced with:



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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).

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

*"Our daughter Sally was six when her grandfather died. We tried to explain to her that he died because he was old and sick and his body did not work anymore. For the following weeks and months we noticed that Sally was quite worried about other members of the family and often asked if their bodies would stop working as well."*

As children enter primary school (at 5–6 years of age) many do not yet understand the finality of death. By the age of 8, children have usually shifted to an understanding that death is permanent. This may lead children to feel more anxious that they themselves may die, or that other loved ones may die. However, primary school children still have a limited ability to express themselves through language and may show their feelings of grief through their behaviour and play.

Primary school-age children may:

- frequently ask questions such as, "where is (the person who died)?" and "when are they coming home?"
- feel that the loss is somehow their fault
- withdraw from friends and family

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February 2020

- act out or misbehave or show some aggression
- not perform as well as usual at school
- have difficulties concentrating.

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

## How to support a child experiencing grief or loss

- Try to maintain normal routines to the best of your ability.
- Allow them to ask questions. Provide simple, clear and honest answers.
- Assure them that it was not their fault that the person died.
- Don't be alarmed if children's play includes scenarios of death as they process their grief.
- Make yourself available for hugs or chats when they are feeling worried or uncertain.
- Acknowledge that grief may be the reason for their change in behaviour.
- Provide information about 'normal' grief – how it comes and goes and can bring strong feelings, but will ease over time.
- Make sure that they feel valued and cared for.
- Ensure that they are supported at home and at school.
- Help them to understand that life will go on; they are strong and will get through this time; and that help is there if they need it.



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

## How should I talk to my primary school-age child about death?

- Provide school-age children with simple, concrete answers to their questions rather than complex scientific or philosophical explanations.
- Acknowledge feelings of confusion or uncertainty as normal responses when something happens that we don't want or understand.
- 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 the 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 younger children experiencing grief and loss, view the fact sheet:**

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

**For more resources on children's grief and loss, visit:**  
**[emergingminds.com.au](http://emergingminds.com.au)**

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