

# Supporting Grieving Children

## 1. Living with the pain of loss

For some children, their loss or bereavement can be the first time that they have experienced profound abandonment. Fears may arise that they might be similarly abandoned again. Nor do all children understand that the pain they feel will subside. In addition, they may try to protect the feelings of others by avoiding displays of emotion in front of them and, as a result, their feelings can go underground and resurface at a later period in their life.

### Strategy – Reassurance

Don't underestimate the impact a loss has on a child even if they do not respond as expected. Reassure the child that their basic needs will be met and that over time their pain will decrease. Maintain routines and standards of discipline as much as possible, as this creates a sense of safety and predictability for the child.

## 2. Children express their grief differently

Children may not have the ability to name or express their feelings because they are not visible or concrete. Because children haven't developed buffers to pain as adults often have, the feelings they experience may be overwhelming for them. Therefore, children often express their grief through their behaviour such as separation anxiety, crying, withdrawal, bedwetting, disinterest in food, or disruptive behaviour at school.

### Strategy – Give children the opportunity to express their grief in their own way

Make time and provision for the child to express their grief through drawing, painting, storytelling, collage, and music, making memory boxes, writing poetry or letters to the person who has died. This can provide a bridge to the expression of feelings that are difficult to articulate. The process of making concrete their feelings, and talking about their work is therapeutic in itself. Don't analyse or interpret the child's work, rather allow them to tell you about it.

## 3. Don't hurry grief

Psychological healing time is different to chronological healing time. Children will often break their feelings up into manageable amounts, as it's difficult for them to tolerate ongoing, intense pain. Therefore, it is not unusual to see a variety of emotions unfold in a short span of time as they slowly work through their grief.

### Strategy – Be consistent

Children may need to ask questions over and over again to make sense of what has happened. Let the child know that you want to understand what they are feeling.

Be patient and provide clear, consistent answers that the child will understand. Don't be afraid to ask the child what they are thinking or feeling, as they will often be forthcoming if they feel that they will be heard and accepted.

#### **4. Children's age and development influence their understanding of death**

Very young children are often unable to understand the permanence of death or separation and can anticipate the return of the person who has gone. As they grow older, they will learn to grasp the finality and permanency of death.

##### **Strategy – Ensure your responses are age appropriate**

Be attuned to children's perceptions of death by asking them about the person who has died. Gently help them understand that the person who has died is not coming back, but also reassure them that the deceased is not in any pain. Avoid metaphors such as 'gone to sleep', 'at rest' or 'lost' as this may be confusing for children who can take these terms literally.

#### **5. Role models**

There is no need to teach children how to grieve; their strong sense of intuition is usually their best guide. However, it is often this intuition that informs them about other people's feelings and responses to grief and in turn, how they should respond. Therefore, it is important that those around them are able to express their grief in a healthy, open manner.

##### **Strategy – 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 understand that it's okay for them to do the same. Resist trying to fix children's pain, by avoidance or distraction. Where appropriate, enable children to be with other children who may have had a similar experience.