

Children's Understanding of Death at Different Ages

Children of primary school age

- Begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and final. They may be fascinated with the physical aspects of death or the rituals surrounding it.
- May see death as a person who might 'come to get you' or 'catch you' if you are unlucky.
- Begin to develop their imagination and 'magical thinking', which reinforces the belief that their thoughts or actions caused the death and can lead them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.
- Mostly have an awareness of death having a cause and being irreversible, but at younger ages do not necessarily see it as inevitable, particularly in relation to themselves.
- As they get older, begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life.
- Can become fearful as a result of their deepening realisation of the possibility of their own future death.

How Children and Young People Grieve:

As concerned adults, we would like to be reassured that children are too young to feel the deep sadness and despair that grief can bring. Sadly, this is not the case. Children and young people grieve just as deeply as adults but they show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by mirroring the responses of the adults around them, and rely on adults to provide them with what they need to support them in their grief.

After the death of her sibling, Meg's father kept himself very busy at work and when he came home started a frenzy of redecorating the house. Meg emulated her father's response by going out a lot.

Children have a limited ability to put feelings, thoughts and memories into words and tend to "act out" with behaviours rather than express themselves verbally. They will gradually acquire the language of feelings

by listening to words that you use. Showing your grief will encourage them to express theirs. Their behaviour is your guide as to how they are and this is as true for a very young child as it is for a teenager.

Children are naturally good at dipping in and out of their grief. They can be intensely sad one minute, then suddenly switch to playing happily the next. This apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe

children are unaffected, but this "puddle jumping" is a type of in-built safety mechanism that prevents them being overwhelmed by powerful feelings. As children get older, this instinctive "puddle jumping" becomes harder and teenagers may spend long periods of time in one behaviour or another. One mother said, "My ten year old doesn't seem to care, she cried on the day because we were crying but she hasn't cried since."

For a young person, getting on with life might mean a hectic social schedule as their way of shutting out the pain. Or they may withdraw into themselves, rejecting offers of help and being generally very hard to communicate with. If this is the case, try to stick with it and continue to let a teenager know that you are still there for them, but without putting them under pressure to talk.

The difference between adult and child grief is sometimes illustrated by the following: a child jumps in and out of puddles of grief, but an adult is deep in a river, being swept along with the current, finding it very difficult to get out.

Common responses, feelings and behaviours:

It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close even if the resulting feelings and behaviours look and feel far from normal. Adolescents and teenagers find it hard to reveal intense and difficult feelings with family members when life for

them is already full of challenge and uncertainty. Remember that a child's attention span corresponds to the amount of information they can handle at any one time. When they reach their limit, they may substitute feelings that they can handle for those they cannot. For example, a child may laugh inappropriately to avoid talking about fear or sadness. This may appear uncaring but is actually a safety mechanism to prevent emotional overload. How a child or young person responds to someone dying will be influenced by their age and understanding, the relationship they had with the person who died, and how that person died.

Age and Understanding

All children are different and a mature 4 year old may have a better grasp of the situation, and of the full meaning of what being dead means, than a child who is older. An older child generally understands more. The increasing realisation of the full implications of someone dying can be too much to bear, resulting in self-protecting denial and appearing OK.

What helps grieving children and young people?

One of the most frequent questions that is asked of our Support and Information Team from adults caring for grieving children and young people is 'How can I help and what can I do?' Every child is unique and will cope with the death of someone important in their own way. There is no magic formula but we hope that this information sheet will help you to better understand what it is that grieving children need. It has been written with input from the children and young people that we work with and so is based on real children and their real experiences.

How can I help and what can I do?

Grieving is exhausting for everybody, child or adult, but is eased if everyone can do it together and muddle through as best they all can. You can do a huge amount by carrying on as much as you can with the usual routines of home, school, time with friends, etc. whilst supporting one another when the grief feels all consuming.

In the early days after a death, what children of any age need is extra care and concern from the adults around them. Sudden death means there will be no opportunity to say goodbye and children can feel very angry with their parent or sibling who has died and left them. They may have regrets about something they said or wish they had said. They need to know from parents and carers that they are still loved, that they will continue to be looked after despite what has happened, and that they will be involved in any decisions that affect them. What else is needed in the following days and weeks will be dependent on how the child responds, their individual personality, and the circumstances of the death. It is very normal to feel rather out of your depth and not sure what is best to do. It might help to remember that grief is a normal response to a death and no one knows your child better than you. Provided with love from their family, and support from friends and school, most children do not need professional help but if you are in doubt about this, please do seek guidance from the Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Line 01494 568900.

How truthful should I be?

Adults naturally want to protect, but children have a much greater capacity to deal with the harsh realities of life than we realise, as long as they are told in an appropriate way. Even a very sad truth will be better than uncertainty and confusion. What a child does not know they will make up and their fantasies can be very distressing to them and difficult to deal with. One child said "It helps to know why everyone in the family is sad and worried because

when you don't

know what is happening you can't help thinking it's your fault."

Children and young people need information given in words appropriate for their age and understanding. Without information, they cannot start to make some sense of what has happened. Children pick up on

atmosphere and will be aware that there is something that everyone else knows about but not them. This can create feelings of exclusion and isolation from the rest of the family. When there are no secrets, a family has the chance to get closer together; the children can trust in the adults around them and are more likely to express their feelings more freely, talk about any fears, and be able to receive reassurance and comfort.

The word "dead" feels very harsh, should I use it?

Phrases such as "gone to sleep" or "passed away" or words such as "lost" may feel kinder but are misleading and will lead to confusion and complication. We encourage children to find things that they have lost and if they associate going to sleep with dying, this commonly results in anxieties at bedtime. Saying the person "went away" may cause the child to feel abandoned or think he or she did something wrong and is no longer loved. Our information sheet Explaining To Young Children That Someone Has Died will give you words to use to explain the concept of death to your child. They keep asking me questions, how should I answer them? Questions need to be answered honestly, and in simple language suitable for the child's age. This may seem harsh but bereaved children tell us that they need adults to speak to them in a way that is clear and unambiguous. It is helpful to reassure a child that it is OK to ask questions and to talk about what has happened. Children are very literal and may have a different understanding of the words such as "heart attack" to that of an adult. It is easy to assume that they know what we are talking about. Check their understanding by asking them what they think a heart attack is.

Young children may need repeated explanations and answers. This can be very wearing and hard to deal with but it is a child's way of fitting together all the pieces of the jigsaw.

Questions from a child are

sometimes not about more information but more a way to check out that what has happened is true and not just a bad dream.

Will they need any time off school and if so, how much?

When their world has fallen apart, the familiar routine of school feels safe and secure, and is a helpful reminder for a child that not everything has changed. As was said earlier, what bereaved children and young people want is a sense of normality. School can provide this. School also offers a chance to have some time off from grieving.

Most of the children that we see at Child Bereavement UK want to get back to school after one, or at the most a few days. Some children do need a few days more at home but the longer they are away, the

harder it is to return. Returning to school after the death of someone important does need to be handled sensitively and the child asked how they would like this managed. It is always a good idea to let school

know what has happened and to keep in touch with staff. You may find our Schools Information Pack and section for schools on our website helpful.

www.childbereavementuk.org/For/Shop/ForProfessionals/SchoolsInformation.

How can I help my child to express their feelings?

Children of all ages do not like to feel under pressure to express powerful emotions, it can feel too painful or just not the right time. Talking is only one way of doing this and for many young people, it is not what they find easy to do. There are alternatives. A shared activity such as walking the dog or playing a game takes off the pressure and therefore can be a time when a child will start to share thoughts and feelings. Developing a memory box together is

another idea to encourage communication. Working through an activity or workbook together is another good way to gently open the door on the subject.

I feel very sorry for my son but he is behaving badly, should I discipline him?

Children can feel very out of control, and scared, when experiencing the death of someone important and respond with challenging behaviour. Your usual daily structures and routines will feel comforting for a child of any age but especially young children. Try to change these as little as possible although it may feel very difficult to do when you are exhausted emotionally and physically. Try to continue with normal standards of behaviour but "normality with compassion" is a good yardstick to use. Anger forms a large part of the grieving process and children of all ages will express it in various ways.

"It was just total anger, you couldn't explain it. It was to nobody and about nothing, it was just anger and it was building up inside me." Tanya age 10 whose brother Teddy died from a sudden illness.

Giving the message that it is understandable for them to be angry is what they need to hear. However, they also need to know that it is not acceptable to hurt themselves or anyone else. Safe ways to release

anger that we use with our bereavement groups include bashing cushions, vigorous physical exercise, a very messy painting session involving hands, going outside to shout very loudly and throwing wet sponges against a brick wall. Any of them can help.

For how long will they grieve?

Children and young people will continue to grieve for life. With support from adults around them, they will learn to adjust to life as it has become rather than how it used to be, but the loss will always be with them.

"I didn't feel anything for the first 3 months. For the next 6 to 8 months I couldn't really handle myself or my feelings. Then after that it took me a long time and a lot of tears but I managed to calm down. Ever since then it's like a long road up a hill." Sarah age 17.

Children and teenagers may need to look again at the details surrounding the death of an important person in their lives as they grow older. Feelings they had when young will be different several years further on as their understanding matures and the meaning of the death changes as they move through life. This is not unresolved grief but the experience of different feelings later in life, often connected to major life events such as moving up to senior school or other change.

Is it Ok for my children to see me upset?

Your children need you to be a model, not a hero. Share your feelings with your child; children learn to grieve from the adults around them. If parents are open and expressive their children are likely to be so

too. On the other hand, they will learn to close down and bottle up emotions if adults are distant and attempting to keep their feelings under control. You have your own grief to deal with which at times will understandably be overwhelming. It is difficult for children to share emotions with an adult who is continuously overcome by grief or depression. If you can, share the load and get support from friends and other family members by asking them to have the children

for a few hours. This will give you space to express any raw grief without having to maintain some control for the children, resulting in your feeling stronger for when they are around. Sometimes what helps a child is talking to someone who is not as emotionally involved. This could be a family friend, or other adult, who is prepared to give some time and listen properly.

Teachers can play an important role here, particularly in a Primary School, as they see a child on a daily basis and can keep a look out for signs of distress or changes in behaviour. Do keep in contact with your child's school and ask them to ensure, without going into detail,

that all staff are aware of what has happened. There is a special section on the Child Bereavement UK website for schools offering guidance and support. Children are very protective of adults they care about and may choose to talk to someone else in order to avoid causing further distress.

Family pets may take on a new significance. One young boy told us that his dog was a source of comfort because it felt warm and soft to cuddle. It let him talk as much as he wanted to without interruption, didn't judge him, and gave him unconditional love and affection.

Will it help them to see a bereavement counsellor?

Particularly in the early days after a death, counselling is not usually what children of any age want or need unless the death has been in very traumatic circumstances. The bereaved children that we work with

at Child Bereavement UK tell us what they need initially is to be with adults who they already know and trust, rather than a stranger with whom they have to spend time building up a relationship. However, in

time, needs will change and some children find speaking to a counsellor helpful, but others will not. Anthony said "Counsellors are helpful I feel because they won't necessarily ask you questions – they just say tell me how you are feeling". But Emily age 17 told us "There is no way that I was going to go to the school counsellor." Seeing a counsellor will not help a child who is not yet ready for this type of support. Looking after yourself is essential. The first step to supporting a grieving child or young person is to get support for yourself. It is not a sign of weakness or not being able to cope if you seek help from others. Don't expect too much of yourself - managing life and your own grief, at the same time as trying to support a child or young person, is exhausting.

Websites which older children and young people like to use.

Do have a look at them yourself first to make sure that they are suitable. They are all safe and the message boards are regularly checked before messages are posted.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

<https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>