

Needs-based strategies for grief and bereavement

Children's Responses to Loss

Children and young people have varying levels of ability to put feelings and thoughts into words and tend to show feelings with behaviours rather than words. Reactions will vary greatly as children absorb and process information in different ways at different ages. Of course teachers are not expected to be experts in dealing with bereavement and loss. However, the relationship you share with the children you work with will be fundamental in how you may support them to access the right support, link up with their existing support networks or help feel “not alone” especially in the midst of a crisis.

Grief - Five Simple Rules (for parents)

Share your grief with your other children

Encourage them to share their grief with you

Express your love with kisses and cuddles

Make quality time to talk and listen

Answer questions honestly

Is there such thing as normal grief?

While we know everyone will ultimately respond differently to experiences of loss or bereavement, especially in the context of a global pandemic where loss may be less understandable (e.g. “why can't I see my friends anymore?”). The following reactions are common, and are likely to settle over time with reassurance, acknowledging what has happened and their feelings, giving them clear and age-appropriate information, and keeping to normal routines.

Young Children

Children's grief reactions are usually intense but short-lived. Young children are receptive to the grief of their caregiver or adults in their life and can become

“clingy”. They may sometimes refuse to go to bed alone and want to keep adults in sight at home so may present as quite tired and lethargic in the classroom.

The advice given to parents is to avoid making drastic changes in daily routines they have set such as meal and bed times. School and school work could be a useful resource in supporting parents to regulate their child’s distress. Seeing a parent in distress is very frightening and parents should be prepared for emotional and physical responses such as tearfulness, bedwetting, and tantrums. Younger children can feel guilt and imagine they contributed to the death or distancing in some way, even by wishing their loved ones would go away when they experience pangs of insecurity.

Children are at a 'magical' stage of thinking, believing that the world revolves around them and they may therefore feel responsible for death, or loss. Death can be related to events in the natural world such as animals and flowers dying, and use the word 'dead' to describe what has happened to the baby. Words like 'loss' and 'taken from us' should be avoided since young children often understand language literally and may think that death is not permanent.

Young children are not able to sustain grieving behaviour for long periods. It is thought this is likely because they are so overwhelmed by emotions that they 'withdraw' from the grief and get on with familiar routines. Their expression of sadness tends to range from bitter outbursts of crying to quiet withdrawal. There are picture books for very young children to help them understand, and they can be encouraged to express their feelings by drawing pictures and engaging in play.

Children at School

School may become the one place in their lives they feel is unaffected by the death and they might appear to be 'coping' remarkably well. Occasionally children may refuse to go to school, feeling that if they are at home they can make sure that all is well. Children may worry about breaking down in front of school friends. They may have off days when concentration is difficult, or get into arguments and fights.

Teachers need to know what has happened and what information the child would like the class to know. The school should provide a quiet 'safe' space where children can spend time during the school day if they wish to rest, and someone the child can go and confide in. During COVID-19 this may be more difficult but

providing some form of online forum or space where they can have space to process may go some way to help them process loss/bereavement.

Older Children

Older children will worry about the reality of death or the impermanence of their relationships with others. Many become over-protective of a parent/sibling/loved one and try to assume the family tasks and responsibilities, or they can be sullen and refuse to talk about what has happened. They may try to protect the adults around them by hiding their grief or giving other reasons for being sad. Some children develop vague headaches and stomach pains.

Where families are members of faith communities, children's understanding of what happens after death will reflect the teachings and beliefs of the community and what they have been taught. Children are interested in death rituals and funerals and may be happier to talk to someone outside the immediate family such as a close relative or teacher. They can express their feelings by keeping a daily diary, and new interests such as sport or music are a positive step.

What helps grieving children and young people

Every child is unique and will cope with the death of someone important in their own way. There is no magic formula but things that help include:

- Clear, honest and age-appropriate information.
- Reassurance that they are not to blame and that different feelings are OK.
- Normal routines and a clear demonstration that important adults are there for them.
- Time to talk about what has happened, ask questions and build memories.
- Being listened to and given time to grieve in their own way.

Has someone important to you died?

Ideas to help you in your grief

People cope in all sorts of ways when someone dies. It can be hard to know what to do to get through this time, especially while we have to be apart from family and friends. Here are some suggestions from other bereaved young people about things you could do. Tick the ones you think would help at the moment, and keep it as a reminder.

Tell people what helps me feel better and keeps me feeling safe

Remind myself that, like the seasons, things will change

Ask if I can keep something that belonged to them

Look after myself and allow time for sleeping, eating resting, thinking and relaxing

Start a memory box or book to help remember them

Ask questions about what happened even if people get upset. I need the facts to understand, and talking about it will help me

Share with others if I start to think I am to blame

Remind myself I'm not going crazy. My sleeping, eating, thinking, memory, concentrating & motivation will be up and down

Laugh and have fun without feeling bad about it

Talk to the person who died in my imagination or write them a letter. This may help me say things I never got the chance to say, and to stay feeling connected to them

Ask for help and support whenever I need it

Stay connected with friends and family even though we have to be apart

Find ways of expressing my feelings by writing, drawing, music or exercise

Ask for any extra help I might need with school work, especially while schools are closed

I'm going to try
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Has someone important to you died?

Ideas to give your parent or carer

People cope in all sorts of ways when someone dies. Sometimes others want to help you in your grief, but aren't sure how. Here are some suggestions from other bereaved young people about ways your parent or carer could support you. Tick the ones you think would help at the moment, and give it to your parent or carer to help start the conversation.

Talk to me honestly and explain what has happened in a way I can understand

Help me start a memory box or book

Give me space but talk to me if you are worried I'm not eating properly or I'm having sleep or other difficulties

Give me a hug

Talk to me about the funeral and how I can be involved, even if I can't be there

Help me keep memories alive by talking and remembering

Notice if I am feeling lonely and find out about groups and resources for me

Help me to have fun and laugh sometimes. This doesn't mean I'm 'over it'

Arrange for me or us to get extra help if I am feeling overwhelmed or I feel I can't talk to you

Make sure school knows about my loss

Remind me I am not to blame and it's not my fault. I may need to talk about this

Help me keep in touch with other family and friends while we have to be apart

Please try
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Has someone important to you died?

Ideas to help your teacher support you while school is closed

People cope in all sorts of ways when someone dies. Often teachers want to help you in your grief, but aren't sure how, especially while school is closed. Here are some suggestions from other bereaved young people about ways your teacher could support you. Tick the ones you think would help, and send it to your teacher to start the conversation.

Please talk to me about how to let the rest of my class know what has happened

Ask me how I am feeling. It may not be obvious

Understand that I will not 'get over it' or 'put it behind me' but with time I will learn to cope with all the changes

Help me to find new dreams of the future and make plans

Check in with me once a week by email or message so that I know you are still supporting me from a distance

Please talk to me about how to explain what has happened

Help me to make a plan for how I will come back to school when it re-opens

Realise that I have a lot on my plate. I will keep up as best I can

Let me know about groups for children and young people who are also coping with loss and change

Arrange for me to get extra help with my work

Talk to me about what has happened. I may need more information, advice and education about loss

Give me extra encouragement for all the things I am managing to do and keep me in mind

Please try
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Has someone important to you died?

Ideas to help your friend support you while you can't meet up

People cope in all sorts of ways when someone dies. Sometimes others want to help you in your grief, but aren't sure how. Here are some suggestions from other bereaved young people about ways your friend could support you. Tick the ones you think would help at the moment, and send it to your friend to help start the conversation.

Ask me how I am feeling - even though I may not always be able to tell you

Give me a break if I'm acting a bit strangely. I'm feeling very confused

Listen to me if you can - it helps get stuff off my chest and makes me feel better

Ask me if there is anything you can do if you notice I'm having a bad day

Be yourself and be my friend, even if you don't know what to say. It helps just knowing you are there for me

Help me keep memories alive by talking and remembering

Carry on telling me about what you're up to even if I don't seem to be listening

Help me to have fun and laugh sometimes. This doesn't mean I'm 'over it'

Talk to me about getting help from an adult if you are really worried about me

Stand up for me if I'm having a hard time

Ask me if I want to talk about what has happened and don't worry if I get upset, it helps knowing you care

Sometimes I may feel lonely. If you message me I'll know you are thinking about me even though we can't meet up

Please try
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