

SUPPORTING GRIEVING PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN



When a loved one dies, especially if that person has had a primary caring role in the child's life, even very young children will miss them and grieve for their loss. This is still a relatively new concept, as it used to be assumed that very young children didn't understand what was happening and therefore didn't feel the loss in any meaningful or detrimental way.

What is now accepted is that even pre-verbal babies and toddlers experience grief and a physical yearning for the person they loved and who is no longer in their life. Pre-school children deserve the same understanding and support that is offered to older children, young people and adults who are bereaved.

HOW ARE VERY YOUNG CHILDREN AFFECTED BY BEREAVEMENT?

Pre-school children will be affected by bereavement in several different ways, both practical and emotional:

- **Daily routines:** The death of a primary caregiver leads to changes in the daily routine that create uncertainty and instability in the child's life. At a very basic level, the very young child will know that the person who is holding them does not smell the same, feel the same, or carry them in the same way. The best you can do is to try to keep daily routines as familiar as possible for them in the weeks after the bereavement.
- **Puddle jumping:** Young children often grieve in 'spurts' because they find it hard to tolerate grief for long periods of time. This is sometimes referred to as 'puddle jumping'. Young children can move quickly between real sadness and normal activities. It can be confusing for adults as the very young child can be extremely upset one moment, and then seemingly happy the next.



Grief does not happen in nice, neat stages, but is unique to the person grieving and influenced by several factors, and this is true for very young children as well. Adults may expect to be able to gauge emotion through tears or through the verbal expression of emotions, and whilst these may be present, children will behave in different ways and often in a manner that may not outwardly appear to be in relation to grief.

Searching Behaviour: Babies and toddlers are beginning to understand the permanence of objects and the people in their lives. If a primary carer dies, they will search for that person, fully expecting them to return. When they don't return, the very young child is likely to protest with behaviour such as crying or temper tantrums. This searching behaviour, followed by distress and anger when they don't find their loved one, is a common response in very young children.

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HOW ARE VERY YOUNG CHILDREN AFFECTED BY BEREAVEMENT (CONTINUED)?

Regression: Young children may exhibit regressive behaviours when they are bereaved, such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, separation anxiety, feelings of insecurity, and needing to sleep with parents. This desire to be 'babied' can make the very young child feel more safe and secure.

Changes in behaviour: The younger the child, the more likely that their grief will exhibit itself in changes in their behaviour rather than in verbal expression. Very young children don't have the vocabulary to express feelings effectively and this can cause frustration. You might notice an increase in destructive behaviour and temper tantrums, but these are a result of grief and not naughtiness. Try to accept that this behaviour is what the child needs to do rather than what they want to do. When your child is expressing anger, explain that it's Ok to be angry but they mustn't hurt themselves or anyone else. You also might notice that your child loses interest in games they used to love, toys they used to play with and routines they used to enjoy. Try to maintain your usual boundaries around behaviour so that they are not further confused.

Understanding: Younger children may have little understanding of what death is and what it means. This confusion can be increased by the use of euphemisms such as 'we lost him,' or 'he passed away.' The things we say thinking that we are doing our best to soften the experience can be confusing. Experts agree that the truth is preferable and clear language can help a young child better understand the phenomenon of death and its permanence, as well as the specifics of their bereavement. Don't be afraid to use the word 'dead'.

The adults around the child: One significant factor that does affect very young children is the way in which those adults around them and who they rely on for their care are affected by the bereavement. It makes perfect sense that the adults in the family will probably also be grieving, and this might affect their ability to care for their child. Try to accept offers of help and support and take as good care of yourself as you can.

Sleep disturbance: we all know that when things are unsettled and we are feeling stressed, sleep patterns can become disrupted. This is true for very young children as well, especially if they want to stay in your bed more than they used to before the bereavement. Very young children who previously settled easily and didn't mind being left might now need lots more reassurance and be less confident about the dark etc. Young children might experience scary dreams more than previously. As with everything else, try as far as possible to keep their bedtime routines unchanged, whilst also acknowledging that it's reasonable to give extra reassurance.



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Guilt: It's not uncommon for even very young children to experience feelings of guilt following a bereavement. Young children are ego-centric by nature and tend to see everything as revolving around them. They have no concept of a world in which they don't exist. This can lead them to believe that as they are central to everything, they must have been central to the bereavement. They may feel that if they'd been better behaved their loved one would still be alive, or that there was something they could have done to prevent the death. Give lots of reassurance that this isn't the case.

Separation anxiety: Even very young babies notice when a care giver is gone. This can make them more fearful about other significant people going as well. In simple terms, if one significant person has gone then what's to stop others leaving them as well? This can create fearfulness which manifests itself in not wanting to be put down or left, wanting to be held and comforted to excess and wanting constant reassurance. This should pass over time and the excessive clinginess should subside as they adjust to their new routines. Extra love and physical comfort will help this process.

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR GRIEVING PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Get help yourself: It might not be the first thing you think about, but looking after your self is so important, and will in turn help your child. Depending on who has died, you are likely to be grieving too. Don't be afraid to accept help from your family and your friends. Don't be afraid to talk to your GP and ask for help. If you live in Devon you can contact the adult bereavement support service, Cruse Bereavement Care

Give lots of physical love, reassurance and positive reinforcement: Children thrive when they feel loved. Becoming aware that someone is missing creates fear in a young child. The best thing you can do is give as much reassurance as possible. Lots of holding, hugging, touching and comforting will reassure a very young child. Babies and toddlers might find comfort in a blanket or cuddly toy as a transitional object as they get used to new routines without their loved one. When their carer is leaving them, always give reassurance of when you are coming back and how much you will look forward to seeing them and reading their bedtime story etc.

Talk to your child: The most helpful thing that you can do for your child is to acknowledge what has happened and explain things to them. Among the reasons that children may not verbalise their grief is that they take cues from the adults around them. They may not feel safe to talk because no one else is talking, or at least not in front of them. Sometimes within the family the child gets signals that talking is wrong or hurtful. They worry that if they bring up the subject, they'll create more sadness and more tears. Adults often assume that very young children are better off not thinking about or talking about the person who died. In response, the children may withdraw into silence. Young children need a lot of reassurance to understand that they didn't influence events and that there was nothing they could have done to prevent a death. It doesn't help to prevent children from discussing their feelings, even if you are trying to protect them. Children, even from a very young age, can handle the truth about the fact that a person has died and how they died. Not talking to them and sharing with them doesn't protect a child from grief, but it can leave the child to grieve alone. Keep conversations simple and straightforward, and don't be afraid to tell your young child that you are sad as well.

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HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR GRIEVING PRE-SCHOOL CHILD (CONTINUED)

Acknowledge their full range of emotions: Try to take the lead from your child and stay with the emotions that they are showing. This can be hard as their emotions won't always be a fit with yours, but as far as possible let them be sad when they are sad, happy when they are happy, and validate the truth of their feelings so that they are not grieving in a vacuum.

Use clear and straightforward language: Don't assume your child has understood what has happened. Try to check out their understanding of what being dead means. In simple terms, young children need to understand that when a person dies, the person's heart stopped, that s/he doesn't breathe or sleep anymore and that they won't see them again. It's important to consider a child's age and to share in age-appropriate detail, and there is no reason to share gruesome details, but whatever is shared with a child should be based on the truth. Even very young children need explanation and information to make sense of their world.

Be prepared to respond to repeated questions and to hear repeated concerns: Quite simply, young children forget, or want reinforcement of something they are processing. It's common for very young children to ask the same questions repeatedly, or to share the same worries over and over again. Try to answer fully every time and try to repeat your response and not vary it too much, so that you don't add to their confusion. Their understanding of what you are saying will change and deepen over time.

Involving your child in rituals after the death: It's not uncommon for adults to believe that children are too young to discuss and plan for or attend a funeral. The reality, though, is that even very young children are capable of participating in family rituals. Of course, children should not be forced to participate or to talk about the person who died, but if they can be included in ritual planning then this can bind the remaining family together, and it also gives them something important to look back on in later life. Children should be prepared for what they might see or hear when participating and then given the option of whether to participate. A plan for an early departure should be put in place in case the child should become overwhelmed and ask to leave

Talk to nursery or pre-school: If your child attends a nursery or pre-school then talk to staff there about what has happened and how it has impacted on you and your child. Explain to them what you have told your child and the language you have used, so that they can support and reinforce in the pre-school setting. Give the school permission to talk to your child about the bereavement so that it doesn't become something that can't be mentioned in the pre-school setting.



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CHALLENGES

The death of a loved one is a universal human experience, something that we are all likely to experience at some point on our lives. The effects of bereavement are cognitive, emotional, spiritual, behavioural, and physical.

The vast majority of young children adjust well over time and with support, but some young children may have greater challenges. Children's behaviour might deteriorate as they test out their new reality and find expression for their upset. Some young children show increased signs of physical complaints – tummy aches, headaches – just generally not feeling right in themselves.

If you are worried about your young child's adaptation to a bereavement, don't be afraid to talk to your GP or another suitable professional. Not all children will require help adapting to bereavement beyond that which their family can provide, but you have a right to discuss your concerns with a supportive adult.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The most important thing you can help your very young child with in the first instance is supporting them to understand the most basic fact that someone has died and will not be seen again. Grief is the normal consequence of acknowledging that their loved one no longer physically exists, and whilst you will want to protect them from emotional pain, it's also important to acknowledge that that have a right to that pain.

There's no single strategy that will ensure that a child can cope with loss, but a variety of options may be helpful, including art, play, crafts and memory projects.

As with adults, grief in very young children doesn't follow a specific timeline. As they grow and mature, their understanding of what has happened, and their feelings about the bereavement will change. Grief doesn't have an end, but it does change over time. Grief is not a problem to fix or solve, or even something to 'get over.' It is instead a process that lasts a lifetime, as does one's relationship with the deceased. Babies, toddlers and children under five years of age, need to have their grief acknowledged and their distress comforted.

WE CAN HELP

Contact us for further support and suggestions for books and resources that can help your pre-school child.

