

# CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AND HOW TO SUPPORT THEM IN THEIR GRIEF



Every child's grief is individual, so it's hard to generalise about grief patterns and expressions, but children's understanding of the loss of a loved one progresses as they mature, so the nature of a child's understanding of death and bereavement will be different at different stages of their development.

Of course all children develop at different rates and it is important to remember that parents and carers know their own child the best.

Adults often feel uncertain about how best to help children, and can be reluctant to discuss their feelings when a death occurs for fear of further upsetting or confusing the child.

This paper hopefully offers some useful guidance about what to expect and how to help.



## RESPONSES TO GRIEF BY LIFE STAGE

Babies do not cognitively understand the notion of death but they can be aware of loss. A baby up to approximately six months old experiences feelings of separation and abandonment when someone significant in their lives is no longer there. The bereaved baby may be aware on some level that the person is not there, and this can cause the baby to become fretful. In particular if it is the primary caregiver who has died, the person who responded to their needs on a daily basis, then the baby will miss their smell, their way of handling them, their voice and so on. Babies can sense loss and can know that something is wrong. Lots of physical contact is important, as is maintaining a routine as far as possible for the baby.

Toddlers can sense when there is excitement, sadness or anxiety in the home. They 'absorb' the emotions of those around them and are not immune to feeling sad, upset and frightened themselves, even though they don't fully comprehend what has happened. They can sense when a significant person is missing and can pick up on the emotions surrounding the fact that the person is not there.

If it is the primary caregiver who has died the toddler is likely to cry and be hard to comfort. They might become withdrawn and introverted if a care giver is no longer around. Some care givers report their toddlers actively seeking out the person they are missing, by going to the various places in the house that they used to see them in the hope of finding them.

Nonverbal caring communications are vital for toddlers at all times, but particularly after the death of someone significant in their lives. Lots of affection, physical contact and reassurances are crucial after a bereavement, and keeping routines and structure in place where possible can be very soothing.

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Pre-schoolers are at a point in their development where they are often asking lots of questions as they seek to make sense of their world. Things often need to be explained again and again as they seek to build their understanding.

This is normal, and if they experience the death of someone significant in their lives, they may need to have things explained to them again and again, gently and with someone they trust. They will find it hard to grasp that the person is never coming back and might ask the same questions repeatedly in their efforts to begin making sense of their loss. Children at this stage do not understand the finality of death, nor do they understand what the term “dead” actually means. They may show sadness for short periods but then escape into play and seem absolutely fine. Again, this is normal and appropriate for the developmental stage that they are at.

Children at this developmental stage tend to think very literally, therefore it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as ‘gone away’ or ‘gone to sleep’ that may cause misunderstandings and confusion.

Again normal routines and structures can be helpful where possible, and play continues to be important even in grief. It's important to be honest and to feel that you can tell the child if you don't have an answer to their questions. You might need to be tolerant of regressive behaviours, although this doesn't happen with all children.

Primary school age, children start to understand about the finality of death and show an interest in what happens after death. They have acquired a wider understanding of death and what it entails, sometimes through the loss of pets, sometimes through meeting and talking to peers who have experienced death, even if they have had no direct experience themselves.

This developing understanding can also increase a child's anxieties regarding the imminent deaths of other people who they are close to. With this in mind it is important that the cause of death, the funeral and burial process and what happens to the deceased person's body are explained in a factual and age appropriate manner to the bereaved child.

Children at this developmental stage may well have empathy for those around them and they sometimes copy the coping mechanisms that they observe in bereaved adults. If those around them are suppressing their emotions, they can feel under pressure to do the same. The bereaved child at this stage in their development can sometimes feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings. As verbal communication is well established at this stage, it's important that every opportunity is made for the child to talk and express their feelings and fears.

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## SUMMARY

- Tell the children about the death immediately, openly, honestly as far as possible and dependent on the circumstances
- How it is said (in a loving, caring way) is just as important, if not more important, than the actual words used
- Avoid euphemisms which cause confusion and disconnection
- Maintain loving physical contact as far as possible and in keeping with traditions within the family unit of hugging and physical touch
- If the same questions come up again and again, try to stay in the moment and answer them again and again as honestly as you can
- Don't feel that you have to suppress grief to protect children. It can be comforting to them to know that you are going through this together
- Explain grief to children and encourage them to grieve openly
- Allow each child to grieve in their own way. They are individuals and grieving takes time

