



BEREAVEMENT AT DIFFERENT AGES AND STAGES - How can we help them?

Introduction

How any child or young person grieves when someone they love has died will depend on many things, such as their:

- age
- gender
- their developmental stage
- personality
- ways they usually react to stress and emotion
- relationship with the person who has died
- earlier experiences of loss or death
- family circumstances
- how others around them are grieving
- amount of support around them.

Babies, children and teenagers may often seem unconcerned, playing or doing their usual activities, so adults can assume they are not properly aware of the death, or affected by it. They are, but in their own ways. Babies, children and teenagers tend to grieve in bursts, and at other times will look for reassurance and comfort in their normal routines and activities.

Bereaved children and teenagers will need ongoing attention, reassurance and support. It is not unusual for grief to resurface later on, even well after the death. This can happen as they move through different life milestones, and develop as individuals.

Babies and Toddlers

At this young age babies and toddlers do not have the language to say how they are feeling, or the understanding of what death is. However, they can definitely experience feelings of loss and separation and are likely to pick up on the anxiety or distress of close adults or others around them.

Common Reactions can include

- looking for the person who has died
- irritable
- crying more
- wanting to be held more - clingy
- less active – quiet, less responsive
- possible weight loss
- jumpy – anxious
- fretful, distressed

How to help them

- Keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- Hold and cuddle them more
- Speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
- Provide comfort items, such as cuddly toy, special blanket etc

skylight.org.nz

info@skylight.org.nz

0800 299 100

© Skylight 2018. For personal and community use only – not for commercial gain. Please credit Skylight and provide website and contact details.

The **right help** at the **right time** in the **right way**



Preschoolers

At this age children find it hard to understand that death is permanent. They are also at a stage of magical thinking, for example, thinking someone will come alive again or thinking somehow they made someone die. They understand separation though, and feel insecure and frightened when the familiar things around them change. This age group needs a lot of reassurance that they will be safe and looked after.

Common Reactions can include

- looking for the person who has died
- dreams, or sensing the presence of the person who has died
- fearfulness, anxiety
- clinginess
- fretful, distressed
- irritable, more tantrums
- withdrawal, quiet, lack of responses
- changes in eating
- difficulty sleeping
- toileting problems, bed wetting, soiling
- regressing in progress, e.g. returning to crawling, wanting a bottle

How to help them

- looking for the person who has died
- dreams, or sensing the presence of the person who has died
- fearfulness, anxiety
- clinginess
- fretful, distressed
- irritable, more tantrums
- withdrawal, quiet, lack of responses
- changes in eating
- difficulty sleeping
- toileting problems, bed wetting, soiling
- regressing in progress, e.g. returning to crawling, wanting a bottle

Primary School Children

Primary school children are still learning to understand death and can have some confused thoughts about it. They may think death is temporary, or that the person who has died may still feel things, such as cold, hungry or lonely etc. They may ask where the person is now, and have blunt questions to ask about what happened to them and to their body. Explaining death to them is very important.

skylight.org.nz

info@skylight.org.nz

0800 299 100

© Skylight 2018. For personal and community use only – not for commercial gain. Please credit Skylight and provide website and contact details.

The **right help** at the **right time** in the **right way**



Common Reactions can include

looking for the person who has died
dreams, or sensing the presence of the person who has died
may blame themselves for the death
easily distracted, forgetful
anxious – increased fears eg of the dark, of other’s safety
clinginess – wants to be near you or others more
withdrawal, quiet, lack of responses
fretful, distressed, not wanting to go to school
feeling embarrassment – feeling different from others – may conceal their loss
physical complaints, such as tummy ache, headaches, aching
irritable, more tantrums, defiant, or developing antisocial or aggressive behaviour
changes in eating or sleeping habits
toileting problems, bed wetting, soiling

How to help them

- Frequently reassure them they are safe, and who is looking after them
- Keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- Tell them you know they are sad – start to use words that describe feelings
- Keep separated from them as little as possible
- Allow questions and provide honest answers
- Comfort them with hugs, cuddles, holding their hand, and by encouraging them
- Speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
- Explain death as part of life, so they come to understand it bit by bit. Using some examples in nature may be helpful, such as watching plants grow, bloom and die or seasons change
- Let them help in planning the funeral or something to remember the loss
- Provide comfort items, such as cuddly toy, special blanket etc
- Encourage play –children often can use play to help them process what’s happened, e.g. sand play, puppets, dolls, writing, drawing, painting and different physical activities

Older Children 10-12

All of the above relate to this age group, but it’s important to be aware that by this age children know death is final. They are also more aware of how adults and others around them are reacting to death.

This group also

- may be especially anxious about the safety of family and friends, and themselves
- may try very hard to please adults and not worry them, and so not let themselves grieve
- may feel stronger emotional reactions, such as anger, guilt, sense of rejection
- may want to take on more adult responsibilities, trying very hard to please
- may feel embarrassment – feel different from peers – may conceal their loss
- may become more focused on what’s happened and ask questions, think about it a lot, have dreams about it, and perhaps want to talk about it often to others

skylight.org.nz ● info@skylight.org.nz ● 0800 299 100

© Skylight 2018. For personal and community use only – not for commercial gain. Please credit Skylight and provide website and contact details.



They also need all the help in the previous sections

plus:

- time to talk with you and other trusted adults, when they need to
- regular reassurance – spoken, and with encouraging physical touch (such as hugs, pat on the back etc)
- honesty about events, and feelings
- to know you understand their grief
- regular encouragement
- avoid expectations of adult behaviour – allow them to be the age and stage they are

Teenagers

By adolescence death is accepted as part of life, but it may not have affected a teenager personally yet. Their reactions may fluctuate between earlier age group reactions and reactions that are more adult. They will often want to be more with friends than family as they seek support. They may find the intensity of emotion overwhelming or scary and not be able to find the words or ways to talk about them with others. They may want to feel they're coping, and be seen to be, but inside be hurting a great deal, or be putting their emotions on a shelf for a later time. Death can so shake teens that some react with risk taking behaviour – to escape the feelings and reality and as a source of comfort. E.g. drinking, drugs, more sexual contact or reckless driving.

Common reactions may include

- easily distracted, forgetful
- difficulty concentrating at school
- unsettled in class, change in class performance, not wanting to go to school
- overwhelmed by intense reactions, such as anger, guilt, fear
- difficulty expressing intensity of emotions, or conflict of emotions
- may blame themselves for the death
- anxious – increased fears about of other's safety, and their own
- have questions or concerns about death, dying, mortality
- dreams, or sensing the presence of the person who has died
- wants to be near family or friends more
- withdraws to be alone
- physical complaints, such as tummy ache, headaches, aching
- irritable, defiant, more antisocial or aggressive behaviour
- risk taking behaviour to escape, to comfort, or to prove they're alive and strong e.g. drinking, drugs, more sexual contact or reckless driving.
- changes in eating, sleeping habits
- bed wetting
- jokes or humour masking feelings
- saying, or acting like, they don't care
- wanting to take on more adult responsibilities, trying very hard to please
- strained relationships with others – fear or awkwardness about being close to othersx
- feeling embarrassment – feeling different from peers – may conceal their loss
- sense of loneliness – isolation
- change self image, lower self esteem
- possibly suicidal thoughts
- possible move from sadness into depression

← skylight.org.nz

● info@skylight.org.nz

● 0800 299 100

© Skylight 2018. For personal and community use only – not for commercial gain. Please credit Skylight and provide website and contact details.

The **right help** at the **right time** in the **right way**



How to help them

- be honest and let them know what's happening
- be willing to listen, and available to talk with about whatever they need to talk about
- acknowledge the emotions they may be feeling—fear, sadness, anger it can be helpful for parents, or other adults, to share their own feelings regarding the loss
- frequently reassure them they are safe, who is caring for them, and which adults they can trust to ask for further support
- keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- talk to them about grief – what it is, that it's normal, that everyone is different
- avoid expectations of adult behaviour – allow them to be the age and stage they are
- encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings - give them ideas of things they could try, such as do physical activities, write, sing, listen to music, talk with friends, read etc
- allow questions and provide honest answer
- comfort them with hugs, cuddles, holding their hand, and by encouraging them
- speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
- talk about death together, answer any questions they may have
- let them help in planning the funeral or something to remember the loss

Conclusion

Bereaved children and teens will need ongoing attention, reassurance and support. It is not unusual for grief to resurface later on, even well after the death. This can happen as they move through different life milestones, and develop as individuals. As they get older they start to see things in new ways and can often have questions about what happened.

At any point, if you are concerned about any extreme reactions, or if you think the young person may have become depressed, contact your doctor or other trained adviser, such as a counsellor, senior staff from their school, social worker, community or youth worker or a local family support agency.

skylight.org.nz ● info@skylight.org.nz ● 0800 299 100

© Skylight 2018. For personal and community use only – not for commercial gain. Please credit Skylight and provide website and contact details.

The **right help** *at the* **right time** *in the* **right way**