

Understanding Children's Grief



Bethel Funerals

Compassion . Peace . Hope



Children, Death and Grief

It is important to acknowledge openly the reality of death with children. It is necessary to discuss grief and care for children in ways appropriate to their age.

Stages of children's grief

Age 2–5

At this age children have trouble understanding the permanence of death; they may cry and cling to you. They may try to retrieve the lost person.

Age 5–9

Children at this age will be more aware of others' responses and may be more sensitive to others' reactions. They may also try to protect adults from the way they're feeling. At the same time, they can seem quite morbid, asking very confronting questions.

Age 9–12

These children are more aware of the finality of death and can be quite afraid of their own mortality and develop physical symptoms.

Adolescents

Can show signs of grief but may also suppress their feelings. They may explore other cultures and the meaning of life. They may also feel very alone as their peers may not have experienced such intense loss, or know how to share this experience.

It is good for children to see adults cry. Feelings expressed appropriately are far more acceptable than feelings expressed in anger, frustration or in a destructive way.

It is often helpful for children to act out their grief – whether this is by drawing, play acting, clay modelling or other play activities. Children are far less inhibited than adults and these activities can be stimulating, helpful and cathartic for them.

Discuss the Funeral Service and how it affected them. This will help them to understand the meaning of this ritual.

There is a misconception held by many that once the funeral is over life can return to normal. Life will never be the same again following the death of a loved one. People need care and support as they adjust to their loss and reintegrate back into society. Grief and mourning may all continue after the funeral. The amount of time each person needs may vary greatly. This is true for children as well as adults.



Ways To Respond To Children

How children respond to a death and understand it will depend on their age and stage of life.

In General:

It is advisable to refrain from saying a person, “went to hospital and died” or “went to sleep.” This can raise fears in a child about going to hospital or going to sleep. Don’t be afraid to say, “the person has died.”

Keep it Simple

Use language the child can understand.

Encourage them to express Grief

“It’s okay to cry. It’s okay to express your feelings.” Allow your child to talk, cry, draw etc. in whatever way they need to express their grief.

Be Aware of other Losses

If a death means moving house, changing schools or loss of a parent, explain who will take care of them and provide as much stability as possible.

Provide them with Mementoes

Keep the memory alive. Continue saying the loved one’s name and talking about them.

School Involvement

Keep in contact with the school, let them know how you would like them to handle your child and how you have approached their grieving process.

Protect Them

If media or security is involved, protect them from overexposure to these sources.

Be Honest

Answer their questions openly and honestly. If you don’t, they may lose their trust in you, which can have other devastating effects later in life.

Understanding The Grief Process

The Grief Process is a natural process that we need to normalise, both for ourselves and for children.

The Grief Process includes:

- Shock and Disbelief
- Searching and Yearning
- Disorganisation and Despair
- Rebuilding and Healing

The Grieving Child may:

- Imitate the behaviour of the deceased
- Want to “appear” normal
- Need to tell their story over and over again
- Enjoy wearing or holding something that belonged to their loved one
- Speak of their loved one in the present tense
- Tend to worry about health and the health of surviving loved ones
- Become the class clown or be impatient in school
- Become withdrawn or unsociable
- Bed-wet or have nightmares
- Be restless and irritable
- Not complete school work
- Have problems listening and concentrating on a task
- Become overly talkative
- Become disorganised
- Show reckless physical action
- Show difficulty in following directions





Some Grief Processing Activities

Preventative Activities

Designed to prevent the build-up of feelings

- Walks, music and play
- Allow them to tell their story over and over again
- Drawing

Processing Activities

To process and relieve the burden of grief

- Paint and glue
- Hammer and nails
- Role-play, re-enacting
- Stories

Healing Activities

To heal the pain of loss and benefit from a new environment

- Create a memory book/box
- Construct a Family Tree – emphasising the on-going lives rather than the deaths
- Write a Life Story – compiling the family history

If Grief Becomes Extreme

Sometimes a child's grief can become extreme. This may be an issue if someone dies suddenly or in a traumatic way, if the child has already experienced significant loss or if the relationship with the deceased was difficult.

If any behaviours become excessive or continue for an extended period of time, a grief counsellor may be needed to help the child find their normality again.

Find ways to connect with the lost person or event. Diffuse the pain and transform it into a positive experience if possible.

Don't discount the child but reframe the experience.

Children need to know their life has continuity and meaning. If children are not allowed to attend funerals, this creates an environment of denial that inhibits their grieving process.

Grief and loss are ever present in life – when we lose those whom we love, we grieve for them.



Words of Comfort

Psalm 46: 1-5 & 7

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Psalm 73:26

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Isaiah 40:29-31

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

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May you find God's peace and
comfort through this time of
grieving and adjusting to your loss.
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Need more?

If you are in need of further information or help you are invited to take a look at our website: www.bethelfunerals.com.au and go to the 'Grief Care' tab. Here you will find other resources as well as contacts for recommended counselling services.

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