

Grief and Loss

Growing up is an ongoing process of change that involves both losses and gains. Children are likely to show their grief in less direct ways than adults. Children move in and out of grief.

Times when children grieve:

- + when a parent dies or goes away
- + when parents separate or families break up
- + loss of a friend or friendship
- + loss of a pet
- + having a disability
- + loss of memories due to fire or flood
- + loss of culture and homeland when moving to a new country
- + death of a grandparent
- + moving house or changing schools
- + long periods of separation from a parent
- + being in hospital.

Children's understanding of loss

Preschool children

In the years before school, children don't understand that death is forever.

Young children don't have the words to express feelings and will show them in the way they act. They may be more clingy and needy or develop problems separating from you.

Early years of school

Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent. Some children feel responsible for the death or separation and think it was because they were naughty. They may also worry about who will look after them, e.g. if they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well.

Later primary school years

Children now understand that death is permanent. They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, e.g. blame one parent for a divorce.

They may be interested in life after death and want to know what happens and ask spiritual questions.

Teenagers and grief

Teenagers grieve in much the same way as adults but at this stage of their development they often have emotional 'ups and downs' so can become deeply distressed. They can also become withdrawn, depressed and moody.

Special Note

Professional help is needed if your child:

- + talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- + seems to be preoccupied with dying
- + is unable to concentrate and is withdrawn at school months after a major life event
- + is crying, sad or depressed much of the time.

What parents can do:

- + provide a safe environment where your child feels able to express feelings. Help them find ways to show their feelings through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting or drawing
- + give clear and honest information to children in a way that they can understand
- + allow children time to talk, ask questions and share worries with a caring adult
- + if a child can't talk about their feelings say something like "Some things are really hard to talk about, but talking can help. If you ever want to talk about what has happened, let me know"
- + stick to the family routines. Too many changes will add further stress
- + children grieve in bursts, they have their own individual reactions, and feel loss just as much as adults but may show it differently.

