



# Helping Children with Grief

Trinity Grammar School | TESS Department | Parent Information Series



## What is grief?

Grief is a multifaceted response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died, to which a bond or affection was formed. Often grief is a term applied to death, but other kinds of losses can cause grief reactions.

## Children's reactions to grief

Children grieve and typically feel many of the same things adults feel. They may feel disbelief, fear, sadness, numbness, confusion, physical pain, guilt and anger, and exhibit disorganisation.

Children's responses will differ according to their age and developmental level. Even very young children may experience grief.

Once children accept the death, they are likely to display their feelings of sadness on and off over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. Parents and carers should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that the child has permission to show his or her feelings openly and freely.

Feeling better usually happens gradually. The grieving process takes time, and grief can be more intense at some times than others. Grieving people can feel like they are moving forward and backward but, over time, can generally recognise differences.

## Should my child see a Counsellor?

Grief is a common and normal response to a death and loss of attachment. Children may or may not want counselling in the same way as adults may choose or not choose to access counselling support. There are times that grief can look a bit like depression. However, it is not the same as depression and not an illness. Grief is a healthy response to the painful reality that one's world is forever altered and will never be the same.

Children and adolescents are resilient and the majority cope with and process significant loss and return to normal functioning.

## Things to look for in complicated grief

- an extended loss of interest in daily activities and events;
- prolonged inability to sleep, prolonged loss of appetite or prolonged fear of being alone;
- acting much younger for their age for an extended period;
- prolonged social withdrawal;
- sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school;
- excessively imitating the dead person or repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person;
- denial of the death altogether.

If these signs persist, professional help may be needed. The TESS Counselling Department has psychologists available across all campuses to consult with and support students. They can be contacted on 9581-6035.

### References

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au>

<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au>





### What is **helpful** to say?

"Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"It sounds really... painful, distressing, frustrating for you right now."

"What do you need right now?"

"How would you like me to help?"

### What is **unhelpful** to say?

"You will get over it."

"Move on."

"Don't dwell on this."

"You are better off concentrating on your school work."

"Thinking about your friends won't help your marks."

"Boys don't cry."

## Things that can help a grieving child

- Let children know that you understand they are having difficult feelings. Validate their feelings and tell them you are sad too. Telling children how you feel, and how you are managing your feelings, helps children make sense of their own feelings.
- Children require accurate information in plain language at a developmentally appropriate level.
- Children will want to know what death is, what causes death and where people go after they die.
- Inclusion in family grief and social rituals such as funerals and memorial services can be beneficial.
- Understand that regressive behaviour or misbehaviour may be your child's way of coping.
- Provide extra reassurance - spend time with your children and keep them close for a while.
- Death can also cause children to worry about their parents or themselves dying. Reassure them that everyone is safe and make sure that they are cared for during times of grief.
- Allow children to release feelings through opportunities to play, talk, write in journals, draw, or engage in music or reading.
- Routines wherever possible help children feel more secure. Having fun is important.
- Allow them to help with tasks at home. This helps them feel useful, important and provides a sense of control. Similarly allow choice with little things when possible.
- Discuss with the child's teacher and talk about what has happened so the child's teacher or Housemaster can put in place ways of supporting the child if distressed.



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