

Appendix 1: Children's grief reactions across the age range

The sections below present a brief summary of how children react to bereavement at different age ranges, with tips on how to respond and communicate.

Note that children will progress through the stages at different rates, and may regress and behave as a younger child as part of a response to grief. Teenagers 14 and over begin to understand death in a similar way to adults, although again they may need similar comfort and reassurance to a younger child.

Children of all ages often respond well to creative and practical activities, reading stories, sharing memories, looking at photos, making a memory book or display, writing letters or messages to the person who has died, listening to stories or watching films about loss, or where characters cope with bereavement.

Similarly, children of all ages can participate in family or community rituals to celebrate the life of the deceased, including religious practices or non-religious ceremonies.

Children aged 2 to 5

- Show magical thinking about death and dying.
- Can become convinced their actions caused the person to die.
- Often think that death is reversible.
- Temporary regression to behaviour when they were younger.
- Repeated questions to try to make sense of what has happened.

What teachers and parents can do to support grieving in children 2 to 5

- Use concrete, literal language "Mummy has died".
- Offer specific explanations about why the person died.
- Offer repeated reassurance that the death was not their fault.
- Don't be afraid to be honest and tell your child if you don't have an answer.
- Read books on death and loss.
- Give opportunities to play, draw and to identify and talk about worries and feelings.

Children aged 6 to 9

- Begin to develop an understanding of death as irreversible and inevitable.
- May be confused, or hold "spooky" beliefs (about zombies, spirits, ghosts).
- Can display an intense curiosity with the specifics of death.
- Grief is sometimes expressed as physical complaints, e.g. sore tummy, headaches or generally not feeling well.
- Helplessness, withdrawal and aggression can also occur.

What teachers and parents can do to support grieving in children 6 to 9

- Help them talk about specific worries, share bad dreams.
- Give clear explanations about specifics, e.g. dead bodies don't feel anything
- Tell them what they are feeling is normal.
- This helps develop skills and confidence to be in charge of feelings.
- Show them that it's OK to express their feelings.
- Avoid clichés such as "You're such a brave boy/girl" which may discourage them from talking.

Children aged 9 to 13

- Now tend to understand death as both concrete and abstract, including it being final.
- Become more aware of the impact it has on them personally.
- Often begin to anticipate what they will miss about the person who has died in future.
- May feel unsafe or unstable and experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers.
- There can be a tension between wanting to be independent and needing to rely on family more.
- Mood swings, with intense highs and lows are common, as well as big emotional releases (such as of anger or distress).

What teachers and parents can do to support grieving in children 9 to 13?

- Communicate that their feelings are normal and show you are willing to listen and accept what they say.
- Ensure as much stability and continuity as is within your control.
- Find ways to build their sense of being capable and able to manage.

Teenagers 14 and over

- Have an adult level understanding of the nature of death.
- Often rely on support from outside the family, for example from peer groups.
- Like adults, teenagers may experience a range of emotions from sadness, anger, irritability, guilt, loneliness, turmoil, relief, numbness, helplessness, or feeling abandoned.
- Grief may also be felt through physical reactions, including sweating, nausea, racing heart, tightness in chest, vomiting, no energy, stomach aches, headaches, and bedwetting.
- Reactions such as denial, repression, depression, intense curiosity, withdrawal from family, risky behaviours such as drug and/or alcohol use, sexual promiscuity, criminal activity.

What teachers and parents can do to support grieving in teenagers 14 and over?

- Listen, understand and accept their personal way of grieving. Let them know
- Avoid appealing to the idea of “toughing it out” or expectations of “being strong” as this can restrict how a teenager grieves, or lead to self-blame for not being strong enough.
- Let them know it is ok to show they are affected, but also ok to carry on with other things.
- Remain empathic and non-judgmental, be available to talk if the teenager wants to talk, but be clear it is also ok not to talk.
- Support connection with groups outside of the family.
- Maintain consistency with family rules and routines, including consequences if teenagers push boundaries in extreme ways. This helps to maintain a sense of control and normality.
- Keep an eye out for signs of distress or danger. If a teenager exhibits signs of potentially harmful coping behaviours, seek professional support.