



# Advice for Parents and Carers

## How do children & young people react to bereavement or loss?

**There is no 'right way' to react when someone dies or when a loss is experienced and every child or young person will respond differently. The following information is provided to help parents and carers who are supporting a young person through a period of bereavement (whether the loss is through death, divorce or other circumstances).**

**It is important to remember that children are very resilient and most children, with support from adults, are well able to cope with the grief and loss they may experience in their lives.**



## Developing an understanding of loss

As children grow and develop, so does their ability to understand the concepts of death and loss. These different levels of understanding are important to keep in mind when talking with your child about loss.

### 0-5 years:

Children at this stage don't understand that death is permanent. They may feel bewildered, and think or act as if the person will come back.

### 5-12 years:

There is a growing awareness that death is irreversible, but magical thinking may be present (e.g. the belief that wishing hard or being 'good' might bring the person back). They will struggle to comprehend in the absence of an explanation and may feel guilty or to blame in some way for what has happened. They may feel fearful, worried, or angry.

### Adolescents:

Often think about the uncertainty of life. They may feel depressed, resentful, or responsible for the welfare of siblings and even carers.

## Common reactions to grief and loss

- Feeling emotionally fragile - tearful or weepy
- Anger
- Acting younger than their age - clingy or insecure
- Acting out in school or at home
- Difficulty concentrating
- Temporary loss of appetite
- Worry/Anxiety
- Sleep difficulties and/or nightmares.

**Children often show their feelings through behaviour rather than words.**

## What parents and carers can do to help

- Answer questions and talk about what has happened, but don't pressure your child to talk if s/he doesn't want to. Children often need to talk about their feelings and experiences well after the event. Remember to use language that your child can easily understand.
- Encourage your child to participate in family traditions and/or religious ceremonies surrounding death and grieving along with you.
- Accept that older children may prefer to talk to their friends or other family members about what has happened and their feelings.
- Talk about how you're feeling and about feelings and behaviours that are 'normal' when grieving. You can provide a positive model of coping to your child and show them that it's all right to cry or be angry.
- Try to keep to normal routines—this can provide security and familiarity during times of change.