

Insight into...



Loss and Bereavement: developmental age and understanding

Health & Wellbeing Series: 3

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 @WL_EPS

"Pupils with better health and wellbeing are likely to achieve better academically"

This information has been taken from the West Lothian document: "[A Whole Community Approach to Supporting Children and Young People with Loss and Bereavement](#)". Please click on the link to access the fuller document.

The nature of a child's understanding and response to bereavement and loss will be different at different stages of development. Although a child's grief is individual, their understanding of the loss will progress as they mature. Children are likely to show their grief in less direct ways than adults. Children move in and out of grief. One day they seem to be fine and another day they will be showing that they are not managing so well.



Grieving in children may need to be addressed again and again as the child gets older. Since bereavement is a process that continues over time, children will think about the loss repeatedly, especially during important times in their life, such as transitioning to secondary school and during significant events such as birthdays or anniversary of the death. It can be helpful to discuss with an older child bereaved at a young age that their understanding of death would have been different to now and explore how their understanding grows and changes as they do.

The information below is just a guideline, it is important to look at each child individually and work out the best way to support them.

Infancy to 2 years of age

Concept of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will have an awareness of those they are attached to and experience separation anxiety • No concept of the absence as being permanent • Awareness of changes to routines
What you might notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No language to express their loss – may cry/ scream and develop eating or sleeping problems as well as being unresponsive to a smile or coo • Always rule out any possible illness with a doctor, but if they say the child is well, safe to assume that it is a grief reaction
What helps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to minimise as many disruptions to their care as possible • Much comfort will be required – which may be difficult if the remaining care givers are also grieving; extra comfort by holding more, rocking, playing calming music softly in background, talking in a softer voice • Help the caregiver to feel supported and attended to so they can care for the child.

Ages 2 to 4

Concept of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not able to understand death • May think death is reversible and not permanent
What you might notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicting statements showing inability to understand finality of death: "I know Mum has died, will she be at my birthday party next week?" • May ask a lot of questions over and over again • May see change in their eating and sleeping patterns, wet the bed, be irritable and confused
What helps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be patient and give factual information – no need for lots of details • Short, honest interactions • Comfort and reassurance • Consistent routine

Ages 4-6

Concept of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death is seen as temporary – a place people can go to and come back from • May see the separation as a punishment and feel responsible • As they continue to develop they will start to realise that death is irreversible
What you might notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May act as if nothing has happened • Reasonably secure picture of their loved ones inside them • May not have the language to express their emotions • Pretend play featuring death/dying (e.g. acting out the funeral, killing a toy and bringing it back to life) – is normal and helps the child integrate the reality of the death
What helps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimise separation from main care givers or provide reliable 'others' • Check what they understand and reassure • Be watchful for feelings of guilt, rejection, anger, resentment • Encourage and support expression/memories perhaps through play and art • Provide terms for some of their feelings such as numb, grief, sadness– you could join pretend play and offer guidance

Ages 6-10

Concept of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By around 6-8 years, still magical thinkers – 'was it my fault?' • By around age 10 they may have developed a more mature understanding about death – recognition that it happens to everyone and can't be changed
What you might notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May want to know more about death, why and how? • May make them feel less safe and become more dependant • May find it difficult to express their feelings
What helps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check what they know and ask if they have any questions? • Be truthful and open • Provide simple information – so they don't make inferences from insufficient information • Allow them to still see friends • Be watchful for feelings of guilt, rejection, anger, resentment and abandonment • Allow the young person to express emotions through creative activities • Give physical outlets for stress release such as exercise

Ages 10 to 12

Concept of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death cant be changed and happens to everyone
What you might notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often full of thoughts on the meaning of life and death • Can feel like they are the only one to experience grief
What helps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check what they already know and what they would like to know • Check understanding of language. Don't assume they understand adult terminology e.g. 'cancer spreading' • Allow expression of emotions – sadness/ anger • Be clear, honest, open • Be available but allow alone time • Maintain access to peer/social support • Consider support groups with other young people who share similar experiences • Consider impact of emerging independence/ identity

Adolescents

Concept of death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand what death means but are only beginning to deal with it emotionally
What you might notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May protest loss by acting out/or withdrawing May feel life is unfair to them and act angrily May test own mortality by taking risks May express a wish to be with the person that has died – this is a common reaction and doesn't necessarily mean they are suicidal however it is important to clarify with the young person Act in a way they think is 'adult' or 'expected' and therefore hide how they are feeling Role confusion and feeling responsibility of stepping into a new role within the family
What helps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be available to talk about their experiences Offer opportunity to spend time with other young people their age who've had similar experiences (peer relationships can feel more important than adult relationships) Make sure they are not taking on too many responsibilities / roles Allow them to express their emotions— young people are keen to fit in and may be embarrassed about their feelings and hide them

It was a long tunnel of memories, tears, pain and crazy feelings, but I made it through

Grief is messy, painful-intensely painful, lonely, I feel crazy, tired, sad and overwhelmed

Expressions of Grief

Provided with the right support, most young people experiencing loss or bereavement will not need professional specialist support.

It is useful to do some 'watchful waiting' which means allowing the normal expression of grief to take place. This can be difficult but it is important to give young people the time, space and support to express how they are feeling and what they are thinking.

I feel angry at no one in particular, just angry

It's hard to talk to your parents about who died in case you cry and make them cry

Further Supports and Information

Child Bereavement UK

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Child Bereavement Network

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Winston's Wish

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Grief Encounter

www.griefencounter.org.uk

Cruse

www.cruse.org.uk

If you are a **parent/carer**....take care of yourself. Allow yourself time and space to grieve for your own loss. The more you look after yourself, the better able you will be to support your child

If you are a member of **staff**....see [A Whole Community Approach to Supporting Children and Young People with Loss and Bereavement](#)" for a number of safeguarding procedures that can help staff avoid becoming overburdened or distressed.