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STUDY CENTER**

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## How children and young people grieve

As concerned adults, we would like to be reassured that children are too young to feel the deep sadness and despair that grief can bring. Sadly, this is not the case. Children and young people grieve just as deeply as adults, but they show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by copying the responses of the adults around them. They rely on adults to provide them with what they need to grieve.

Children have a limited ability to put feelings, thoughts and memories into words and tend to 'act out' with behaviors rather than express themselves verbally. They will gradually gain the language of feelings by listening to words that you use. Showing your grief will encourage them to express theirs. Their behavior is your guide to how they are feeling. This is as true for children of all ages - from toddlers to teenagers.

Children are naturally good at dipping in and out of their grief. They can be intensely sad one minute, then suddenly switch to playing happily the next. This apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe children are unaffected. However, this 'puddle-jumping' in and out of grief behavior is a type of inbuilt safety mechanism that stops them from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings.

As children get older, this instinctive 'puddle-jumping' becomes harder and teenagers may spend long periods of time in one behavior, such as being withdrawn or another behavior, such as keeping very busy.

One mother said:

*"My ten-year-old doesn't seem to care, she cried on the day because we were crying, but she hasn't cried since."*

For a young person, moving on with life might involve a hectic social schedule as their way of shutting out the pain. Or they may withdraw into themselves, rejecting offers of help and being generally very hard to communicate with. If this is the case for a young person you are supporting, try to be patient and continue to let them know that you are still there for them. However, try not to put them under pressure to talk.

The difference between adult and child grief is sometimes illustrated by the following: a child jumps in and out of puddles of grief, but an adult is deep in a river, being swept along with the current, finding it very difficult to get out.



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## Common responses, feelings and behaviors

It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close, even if these strong feelings and behaviors look and feel far from normal. Adolescents and teenagers find it hard to show intense and difficult feelings to family members when life for them is already full of challenge and uncertainty. A child's attention span matches the amount of information they can handle at any one time. When they reach their limit of feelings that are too hard, they may switch to feelings that they can handle. For example, a child may laugh inappropriately to avoid talking about fear or sadness. This may appear uncaring but is actually a safety mechanism to prevent emotional overload. How a child or young person responds to someone dying will be influenced by their age and understanding, the relationship they had with the person who died, and how that person died.

### Age and understanding

All children are different and a mature four-year-old may have a better grasp of the situation, and of the full meaning of what being dead means, than a child who is older.

An older child generally understands more. As they start to realize fully what it means when someone dies, for some children this can be too much to bear. This may lead to self-protecting denial and appearing more OK than they really are. See our information sheet *Children's Understanding of Death at Different Ages* for more information.

### Infants and toddlers

At this age, there will be little understanding of what death and dying means but there will be a sense of someone important missing. The resulting

feeling of being abandoned may lead to more than usual 'clingy' behavior. With no language to express themselves, their anxiety and insecurity may show as inconsolable crying. Feeding and sleeping routines may be disrupted and their distress expressed by being generally miserable.

### Preschoolers

Understanding will be increasing but so will the need for information to try to make some sense of what has happened, resulting in lots of questions. Anxieties about everyday practicalities are common as is increased separation anxiety, even when left for just short periods. There may be a regression in behavior, for example with bed-wetting and generally behaving like a younger child. Some children become anxious about the dark when going to sleep. Children of this age find it hard to grasp the permanence of death and can expect the person to return. When this does not happen there can be disappointment and sadness. They may struggle with the concept of 'no life' and therefore need reassurance that dead people feel nothing and are not in pain.

### School age children

Children of this age are beginning to grasp the concept that dead people do not return to life and that death happens to everyone, including themselves. They can start to fear the death of others important to them. Some children might feel that somehow what has happened was their fault. If they feel this way, some react to this by being especially good to make up for their sense of 'badness'. Others behave badly to attract the punishment that they feel they deserve. Even when there is no expectation to do so, a child may take on the role of caregiver for a surviving adult or siblings. In an attempt to appear grown up they might take on inappropriate adult responsibilities.

## Teenagers

Puberty is a time of great change and, for a young person, grief just adds to this. Teenagers are striving to be independent and grown-up but the death of someone close creates vulnerability. Their feelings of grief may be similar to those of adults, but they have strong inhibitions about expressing feelings, partly to act 'grown-up', and partly to avoid being different from friends. Some young people become apathetic, depressed and withdrawn and develop a 'what's the point?' attitude to school or even life. On the other hand, a very hectic social life can be a distraction from thinking about grief. This can be useful at times, but the feelings of grief may re-emerge suddenly, which can be difficult to handle. Risk-taking behavior or anti-social behavior is not unusual.

None of the above are cause for concern unless they last for a long time or affect a child or young person's ability to engage with normal life or their safety and wellbeing. It is important to remember that grief is normal and with the right help and support, most children and young people will be changed, but not damaged, by what has happened.

## The relationship they had with the person who has died

The loss of a parent or primary caregiver can have a devastating effect on a child. Feelings of insecurity are common, and children will be concerned as to 'who will look after me now?' This may appear insensitive, but children live in a very concrete world and need to know that they will continue to be cared for. They can also fear that their other parent is going to die and will need lots of reassurance around this.

Following such a loss, children may feel it is their duty to take on the responsibilities of the parent who has died, even when nobody expects this of them. It is just something that some children feel they have to do. This is a heavy burden for them to bear and they will need lots of reassurance that this is neither an expected nor appropriate role for them to take on. In time, everyone may be able to adjust to living life as it has become, with new routines and ways of doing things.

When a child dies within a family, their brothers or sisters may feel left out as so many emotions are understandably focused on the child who has died. Siblings can have conflicting emotions of deep sadness, mixed in with relief that adults might now have some time and energy for them. They can then feel bad for having these thoughts, and guilt is common. When a sibling dies, surviving children may wonder why they are alive, and their brother or sister is dead. They may fear it is their turn to die next.

A grandparent who was very involved with a child's care will be probably be missed more than one who was rarely seen, but it is important not to make assumptions. A death that appears to be not very significant can trigger feelings around other losses.

## How the person died

How someone died will affect a child's response. A sudden death allows no time to prepare for what happens, no opportunity to say goodbye. There is also a feeling of being left suspended, or with unfinished business. When a parent or sibling dies unexpectedly in a traffic accident, or even more traumatically through murder or suicide, the immediate reaction is shock and total numbness. Young people may

feel immense pain at their loss, and anger with the person who has died and left them. Frustration at missing out on planned activities together, which can now never happen, is another response. They may have bitter regrets about something they said, or wish they had said, but never got the chance.

*"I didn't really like Rowan very much and I wish I could tell him now how much I miss him."*

Ruby was age 6 when her older brother died

Considering all of the above, we might assume that

*"We heard a man talking next to us about a young woman who had just died. From that I knew it was my Mum."*

Geoff was age 13 when his mother died

an expected death is easier to bear than a sudden one. This is not always the case, they are just different. For children and young people, the death of someone who has been ill for some time can still be a huge shock, especially if they have not been kept aware of the seriousness of the situation.

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**For further resources, you may wish to visit Child Bereavement UK's website:**  
[www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)