

Factsheet for Families

Supporting children through loss and grief

Very young children, including babies and toddlers, can experience grief as a result of a loss or change in their lives. Grief can result from experiences such as the loss of a favourite toy or comfort item, the death of a loved one or pet, or breakdown of the family. The ways in which children experience and react to grief depend on the individual child, and on their level of development. Adults play an important role in supporting children to express and manage their grief, and in minimising the long term impact that the stress caused by grief can have.

When can children experience grief?

- When a parent or a close family member such as a sibling or grandparent dies.
- When parents separate or divorce.
- When a friend moves away.
- When a parent is away for a long period of time, for example due to hospitalisation or work.
- Moving to a new house and/or to a new school or child care setting.
- When a pet dies.
- The loss of a favourite toy or comfort item.
- Significant changes in their life routine due to illness or accident affecting either themselves or those who care for them.
- Loss of a familiar carer, such as a child care professional or regular babysitter.

How can children be supported?

- Avoid underestimating a child's capacity to experience grief. Recognise that they may grieve quite strongly over something that may seem trivial to an adult.
- Provide them with verbal and physical reassurance.
- Help them to express their emotions, and reassure them that it is normal for them to feel the way they do.
- Allow them to ask questions (even if they ask the same questions over and over), and answer these honestly and sensitively, without providing unnecessary detail.
- Keep routines and rituals stable and similar to what they were before the loss.
- Maintain behaviour limits and boundaries.
- Work with the child care service to exchange information about the child's grieving process to develop consistent strategies to support the child.

How are children affected by grief?

Generally, as children become older they develop the ability to better understand and make sense of death and loss. Very young children don't have the capacity to understand that death is permanent or that something has changed or been permanently lost. As children become older, they may also develop a greater curiosity about why something has happened, or about death and what happens after someone dies.

Grief will affect each child differently, depending upon their age and personality. Some common grief reactions include:

- intense feelings of loss and sadness;
- becoming needy and having difficulty with separation;
- anger;
- anxiety that something bad will happen, for example fear that they themselves will become ill or die, or that this will happen to someone else that they love;
- thinking that the loss or death is their fault;
- curiosity about what has happened and why; and
- physical reactions that may affect sleep patterns, eating patterns and toileting routines.

To discuss any grief or loss that your child may be experiencing, please speak to:

or telephone: