

# Supporting children through loss and grief

By Sonja Tansey

Grief is something that many children experience and it can have profound and lasting effects on their wellbeing. Although children have a limited understanding and experience of the world, they are still able to experience overwhelming emotions and negative physical reactions following loss or trauma. To survive periods of grief, children depend on adults to reassure and support them and to provide strength, love and security. Children may cope better with grief when they know that death and loss are a normal part of life and when they are supported by adults to develop emotional resilience.

## The experience of grief

Each child will experience grief differently and their reactions to loss or trauma will be as individual as they are. The death of a family member or friend, parent divorce or separation, illness, moving house or other traumatic events are some of the experiences that can significantly affect children. Children can also experience grief as a result of events that adults may find trivial such as the death of a pet or loss of a favourite toy. Distressing community or world events such as war or disasters can also cause a grief reaction particularly in older children.

Children's grief reactions can range from tearfulness and sadness to shock, confusion, anger, anxiety and depression. The length of time

This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.1, 1.3, 3.1, 3.2 and 3.4

**OSHCQA Principles:** 1.2, 2.2, 3.1 and 5.3

**QIAS Principles:** 1.1, 1.3 and 2.1

that children take to recover from the effects of grief will also vary greatly. Children's grief reactions can be immediate and short term, or may take some time to emerge and continue for long periods.

Brain development research shows that in the early years of life, trauma and grief can release excessive amounts of stress hormones which can damage developing nerve cells in the brain. This can have a negative impact on children's emotional and psychological wellbeing and can have long term effects on their development. However, when children are supported by warm and consistent relationships with their caregivers, the negative affects of stress hormones upon brain development can be offset.

Children often express their grief through actions rather than words so it is important for child care professionals to watch for changes in their behaviour. When experiencing grief, a quiet child may become angry, aggressive or irritable, conversely an outgoing child may become quiet or withdrawn. A child's stage of development and maturity can also impact on how they respond to distressing or traumatic events. For example, very young children may develop feeding problems, sleeping problems, regress in their behaviour or become angry or withdrawn.

Older children may show their distress through their behaviour, for example, not wanting to go to school, fear of the dark, nightmares, or through physical symptoms such as headaches. However, it is worth noting that changes in children's behaviour may not be solely due to grief but a response to other issues in their daily life such as peer group problems or changes to family routines.

Child care professionals can stay in tune with the loss or trauma that a child may be experiencing by communicating frequently and effectively with their family and showing an interest in what is happening in their life. It is crucial that child care professionals are aware of each family's



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cultural sensitivities and traditions in dealing with death and loss. Developing close relationships with families by communicating openly and supportively can create an environment of trust and support when they are experiencing difficult times.

## How can grief affect babies and toddlers?

Young babies can react when the people around them are experiencing emotional pain, stress or fear. In essence they absorb grief through their close attachments to parents and caregivers. Toddlers can notice and begin to understand fear and hurt and may react to the mood changes of adults around them. Toddlers may also try to comfort those showing distress, for example, by giving them kisses and cuddles or offering a special toy. Babies and toddlers also respond strongly to the loss of a parent, close relative or friend as well as to upheavals in family routines. Grief can also cause changes in the behaviour of very young children. They may become tearful, clingy, listless or irritable, and their eating, sleeping and toileting can be affected.

## Supporting babies and toddlers

Very young children can be supported in their grief through the reassurance, warmth and care of staff. By taking time to cuddle, talk to and reassure babies and toddlers experiencing grief, child care professionals can give them a sense of safety and security. Strategies for supporting babies and toddlers who are experiencing grief include:

- keeping routines at the service consistent and familiar;
- making sure that child care professionals are readily available to interact with and support children;
- providing clear, simple, short and factual explanations around death and grief to toddlers; and
- trying not to exaggerate, dramatise or provide explicit details around death, loss or traumatic events.

## How can grief affect preschool age children?

As with babies and toddlers, preschool age children respond strongly to death and loss, particularly of close family members and friends. However, their developing awareness of the events and people around them can cause

more obvious signs of distress and disorientation. Messages about death and loss gained through television and computer games can distort their understanding of death. Preschoolers may show confusion about the difference between reality and fantasy and find it difficult to understand that death is not temporary. Grief can cause changes in the behaviour of preschoolers, for example, fearfulness, irritability, aggressive behaviour, bedwetting, withdrawal, sleep disturbances and nightmares.

## Supporting preschool age children

Providing physical and emotional comfort and reassurance is crucial in supporting preschool age children experiencing grief. Children at this age need repeated reassurance and security through verbal and physical affection and support. Strategies for supporting preschool age children who are experiencing grief include:

- answering children's questions about grief and loss clearly and honestly;
- letting children talk about grief when they want to, but not forcing conversations about their grief;
- not discussing details that may disturb or frighten children, particularly when they have not asked for this level of detail;
- allowing plenty of time for children to engage in uninterrupted play and creative expression;
- being ready to intervene and support the child if they become distressed, destructive or aggressive towards others, and assisting them to find a way to express or relieve their feelings appropriately;
- ensuring there is always a quiet, comfortable place for children to go to if they are feeling overwhelmed and want some quiet time to themselves; and
- communicating consistent messages about death to children that take account of cultural sensitivities.

## How can grief affect older children?

School age children between 5 and 12 years have a greater knowledge of the world around them and will understand that death is final. They may also seek more detailed information about death and traumatic events and they may be interested in explicit biological information about death. Grief in older children can cause emotional, psychological and physical reactions



such as deep sadness, anxiety, depression, aggression, night terrors and headaches. Older children may also withdraw from peers and not want to go to school.

### Supporting older children

Child care professionals can support older children experiencing grief through repeated reassurance and providing them with consistent routines. Providing many opportunities for older children to express themselves and to release stress through unstructured play and physical activity is also essential. Older children can respond well to the support of friends, so it can be useful to create opportunities for small group experiences where friends can talk and interact closely. Strategies for supporting older children through grief include:

- making sure that child care professionals are available to listen to and support a grieving child. It may be useful to nominate one or two people for this role;
- providing a variety of experiences that encourage children's creative expression;
- involving children in decision making about the service program and experiences to help them gain a sense of control over their lives;
- allowing children the time and space they need if they wish to withdraw to a comfortable, quiet place;
- talking to the child and their family about whether they would like the child's friends to know about their loss or trauma; and
- encouraging friends to continue to involve the grieving child in their play.

### Supportive environments for grieving children can be created by:

- Communicating with families about grief and asking them how they would like their child to be supported.
- Reassuring families that it is normal for children to show changes in behaviour, but that with support and time they can heal from grief, loss and trauma.
- Letting children know that it is okay to be sad and to cry.
- Keeping routines steady and predictable.
- Being available to repeatedly reassure children.
- Being genuine and consistent in showing affection to and supporting distressed children.
- Responding sensitively to children's questions and explaining death and loss in simple terms.
- Providing opportunities, resources and books that encourage children to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Ensuring that there are quiet, private spaces available where children can go if they want some time away from the group.
- Using everyday experiences with children to discuss death and loss as a normal part of life.
- Being clear about your own thoughts and feelings so you can stay calm and support children. It is important that adults avoid being seen by a grieving child as responding in an overly dramatic way to the loss the child has experienced.
- Seeking support for families (and staff if needed) from professionals such as counsellors, doctors or health specialists.
- Avoiding being overly solicitous toward a child who is grieving, and ensuring that they continue to have appropriate boundaries for behaviour.

### Emotional resilience and supportive environments

Emotional resilience in children is known to protect them from the adverse affects of life's ups and downs, including grief reactions following loss and trauma. Child care environments that encourage positive experiences and relationships can help to build children's resilience. Child care professionals can create environments that promote resilience by encouraging a sense of security, positive self-esteem and an optimistic view of life and the

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world. They also nurture children's resilience by developing secure relationships, implementing positive learning experiences and by supporting parents and other carers in their caregiving roles (Rolfe, 2002 p.2).

By creating a positive, supportive environment, child care professionals help children experiencing grief to feel safe and secure. A supportive environment also provides a safe-haven for children to express their feelings and seek support. Remember that children express themselves through language, play and creative arts so make sure the service allows plenty of opportunities for these to occur regularly.

Children's experiences of grief will vary greatly in how it affects their emotional, cognitive, psychological and physical wellbeing. No matter how children are affected by grief, child care professionals can play a crucial role in supporting children and their families through loss and trauma. By building children's resilience through trusting relationships and supportive environments, child care professionals can prepare children for life's ups and downs. The distress and confusion that grief can cause for children can be eased when adults observe grieving children closely and respond to their needs genuinely and supportively



### References and further reading

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- Rolfe, S. A. (2002). Promoting Resilience in Children. *AECA Research in Practice Series*. 9(2). ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association.

### Useful websites

- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: [www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)
- National Association for Loss & Grief: [www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)
- Novita Children's Services: [www.novita.org.au](http://www.novita.org.au)