

# Factsheet: Children's Grief



*The Irish Childhood  
Bereavement Network*

## **Children's grief**

How children understand and react to grief depends on their age and stage of development. They gradually understand more as they mature. It is important to realise what your child understands about death so that you can help them if they are confused about what is happening. The following guidelines are general and may help you:

## **Children's Understanding of Death**

### **0-2 Years**

After a death in the family it is common for a baby to become withdrawn or display outbursts of loud crying and angry tears. Although infants do not understand death, they know when things have changed and may react to a person's absence. This may show in clinginess and distress. Maintaining the child's routine and making them feel secure are the most important ways to support children of this age.

### **2-5 Years**

Children still do not fully understand death at this age. They don't realise that death is permanent and is something that happens to everyone at some time. They need to know the person who died cannot return and that they are not simply asleep. They worry that something they said or did may have caused the death and need reassurance to know that it is not their fault. Children should be encouraged to ask questions which should be answered openly and simply. Children often ask the same questions over and over again. Answering these questions patiently will help them and give them reassurance.

### **5-8 Years**

Children gradually learn that death is final and that all people will die at some time. This may make them worry that other people close to them will also die. It can help children to talk about these fears. We can't promise children that no-one will ever die in the family but we can help them to feel safe by telling them that they will always be looked after. It can help children if they are encouraged to talk about and express their feelings, no matter what the feelings are. More curious children in this age group often ask direct questions about what has happened the body as they are trying to understand. They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking', filling the gaps when information has not been given to them.

### **8-12 Years**

They understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Grief can express itself through physical aches and pains and challenging behaviour. It is important not to place unnecessary responsibility on children of this age especially eldest children who may

feel responsible for younger siblings or boys who take on the role of the man of the house if their father has died. Reassurances about changes in lifestyle such as money and whether they can remain in the family home should be given.

## **Adolescence**

Adolescence is a time of great change in the life of a young person. Teenagers struggle with issues of identity and independence, as they try to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood. When a death occurs their life can become very difficult.

**It is important to give adolescents clear and accurate information at the time of a death.** They may wish to take an active part in the funeral arrangements or to mark the death in their own way. Involving teens in the rituals can help them with their grief journey as it can give them a sense of control at a difficult time. It is important to treat them in a manner appropriate to their age.

Unlike young children, **adolescents fully understand the concept of death**; they know that death is final and inevitable. However, confusion arises as they struggle with the multiples of emotions, thoughts and mood changes that the death creates while trying to remain similar to their peers.

**For more information: See [Adolescence and Grief](#)**

### **Grief Reactions:**

Following a death, children can experience various grief reactions –

**Emotional responses** may include – fear, anxiety, confusion, anger, sadness, relief, loneliness, guilt, isolation;

**Physical responses** may include – low energy, interrupted sleep/eating patterns, unexplained aches, pains;

**Behavioural responses** may include – lack of concentration, temporary dis-improvement in school work, memory loss, ‘acting out’, aggression, irritability or regression to behaviour more commonly associated with a younger age eg. bed wetting, sucking thumb or baby talk.

**Social responses** may include – loss of self-esteem and confidence, withdrawal from friends and activities – including school attendance.

Children may exhibit none, some or many of these responses. All bereaved children and young people need to be heard and have their need for information, simple explanations and reassurance met after a loss.

A child’s reaction to death will depend on their personality, how the person died, how the family are coping and a child’s developmental stage. Some children may need more help. This support may include help to understand that their feelings are normal, or perhaps extra help with feelings or behaviours that are disrupting their everyday life. For a very small number of children, their needs may include addressing suicidal thoughts/behaviours and other clinical issues which may require more specialised support.

Children’s reactions to a death can be very intense but brief, they may experience strong

emotions suddenly and then seem to go back to normal everyday activities such as playing with friends very quickly. But they will revisit those strong emotions again and again. We must remember that grief is a heavy burden for children to carry continually so they have a need to put it down.

It is important to remember that grief changes as children get older. As they grow and mature, their understanding of death increases and they may need to revisit their grief again over the years. It can often be surprising for adults that children are talking or upset about a loss that happened perhaps years earlier when the child was much younger. It is very natural for them to try to understand the loss when they have developed a better ability to do so.

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For further information see: [www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)

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