

HOW AGE AND STAGE CAN AFFECT UNDERSTANDING AND GRIEF

Children's experience of a death can differ from adults'. The following provides a guide to a developmental perspective of how a child may understand bereavement. For a child with SEND, his or her functional level of understanding (rather than actual chronological age) will be the biggest factor in how the child reacts to a death and what he or she will be able to understand. The reactions and issues described at each stage often apply equally to children at other stages of development too.

Children under 3 years old

Very young children and babies are not able to understand death but experience the loss as a separation from someone they have an attachment to. Children at this age have little language to express their loss and will react to it by crying inconsolably or become withdrawn. They will be affected by the emotional state of their care givers. They may repeatedly search for the deceased person or have an unspoken expectation that they will 'return'. They also benefit from the same type of consistent and repeated explanations as detailed below for ages 3 to 5 and the maintenance of routine.

Early Years Education – aged 3 to 5 – Preschool and Reception

When a child this young experiences the death of someone important, it is important they are helped to know about the person as an integral part of their history. Young children often ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to understand their loss. They are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that our explanations aren't good enough. Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss.

At this age, they may not understand that death is permanent or that it happens to every living thing. A 4-year-old may be able to tell others confidently that 'my daddy's dead' and may even be able to explain how 'he was hit by a car and he died'. However, the next sentence may be: 'I hope he'll be back before my birthday' or 'He's picking me up tonight'. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat breathe and keep warm. It is important to give them simple, factual information and tell them that once someone has died, their body stops working so they don't feel pain anymore and they don't feel hot or cold and they don't need to eat or drink anything.

Children's thoughts are concrete and characterised by "magical thinking". They may struggle to understand abstract concepts (such as heaven) or roundabout ways of explaining death (e.g. 'gone to sleep'). Children may believe it was something they said or did that caused the death or they may believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the person back. They need to be reassured that the death was not their fault and gently reminded that the person will not come back. By using concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and giving specific explanations about why the person died can help.

It is important to maintain a routine as normal as possible for the child. It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to younger behaviours such as separation anxiety, incontinence, and use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Being tolerant and managing the separation will be helpful for the child and the family. In time, it is most likely these earlier behaviour patterns will disappear once 'new normal' family routines are established.

Key Stage 1 – Ages 5 to 7 – Years 1 and 2

Children of this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent; however, some confusion may still stand. When first told of the death, younger children may be mainly concerned with the 'when' and 'where' of the death. They may express concerns about their own future such as: 'What will happen to me? Who will meet me after school? Will I still go to Cubs?' Giving reassurance about everyday activities and arrangements continuing as normal, or clear explanations about alternative arrangements, will be helpful for the child.

Children may become clingy or more reluctant to see parents and carers leave. There may be a need to stick close to their parent to protect them from the mysterious occurrence that made their dad disappear or at least to be with them if it happens again. Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal, but it is important that routines are maintained while gently acknowledging when someone important dies we feel things like sadness and worry in our bodies too.

They can also feel that in some way they were responsible for the death, e.g. 'I was angry with him and shouted at him when he left for work because he wouldn't fix my bike. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's my fault.' It can be worth saying something like: 'You do know, don't you, that nothing you said or did made this happen?'

Key Stage 2 – Ages 7 to 11 – Years 3, 4, 5 and 6

As children begin to understand more about death and dying, a death in the family may make them anxious about the health and safety of surviving members of the family. They may feel very responsible for their parent(s) and younger siblings and feel the need to keep a close eye on their safety.

Children this age can find it difficult to talk about their bereavement and express their feelings behaviourally, such as withdrawing from others or showing increased aggression. They may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers, particularly as the death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else. It is important to avoid clichés like "You're being so brave" as children can interpret this as they should not share their feelings. They may need a safe space or quiet area away from peers to calm down or express their emotions with an adult.

Children of this age also show curiosity about issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear, factual explanations. Children can also think of death as something spooky, like a zombie, or a spirit that comes to get you. Normalising feelings, talking about or drawing specific worries and sharing bad dreams can be reassuring, giving children skills and confidence to feel more in charge of them.

By the age of 10, children will usually have all of the bits of the jigsaw puzzle of understanding. They will even understand that they are able to cause their own death. They will appreciate clear and detailed information – beyond 'when', 'where' and 'how' the death happened, they will be interested in 'why'.

Key Stage 3 – Ages 11 to 14 – Years 7, 8, and 9

In this age range young people are much more aware of the finality of death and the impact the death has on them. They are able to understand death as both concrete and abstract. They begin to move away from dependence on the family and they start to form important relationships with other young people, however the death of someone important can easily destabilise them, leaving them feeling unsafe and more dependent on the family. Some older children and teenagers may feel internal conflict as a result of feeling a pull towards being with their peers at the same time as their own need or an expectation that they spend time with their family.

Their ability to manage their feelings may be disrupted and lead to mood swings or more definite up's and down's in their feelings. Big emotional releases (such as anger or distress) are not uncommon but can be scary for children at this stage. They will benefit from your willingness to listen and your assurances that the feelings are normal. It is important to find ways to build their self-esteem.

Young people at this age are beginning to think of the longer term consequences of the loss of the relationship. They are aware of the loss they feel in the present, but also of the losses they will experience in the coming months and years when they encounter certain important milestones, or occasions and realise that they won't be able to share these with the person who has died. Talking through these future events and exploring ways of including the person can be helpful.

Key Stage 4 and Sixth Form – Ages 14 to 18 – Years 10, 11, 12 and 13

Friends and peers are increasingly important as young people develop their ideas of who they are and what is important to them. They want to be accepted by other important people in their lives. Their bodies are changing; they are aware of all sorts of possibilities for themselves and their future. Young people may struggle to make longer term plans as the death of someone important causes them to reflect on "the meaning of life" and ponder on the question "what's the point?" Or you may find that they are so busy with different activities they don't stop to reflect. This can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they are worried about losing control of their emotions.

It is quite common for risk-taking behaviour to increase during adolescence as young people test the boundaries. Although an adolescent's thought process is most like an adult's, they are still going through important emotional development at this age and are not ready to manage adult responsibilities even if at times they think they are adult. They need to be reassured of your care and support and to know that the limits you set are still enforced.

As always, if you have any concerns about a young person's safety it is vital you take a pro-active approach and apply your safeguarding policies and procedures.