

Children grieve differently from adults. The way in which a child's grief is supported and managed by the adults around them can have lasting effects and may impact their ability to cope with stressful situations as adults.

It is essential that children who lose a loved one suddenly through violent death (such as suicide) are offered effective and age appropriate help, in order to avoid lasting psychological difficulties.



This fact sheet provides information about what children understand of death and dying and what adults can expect from grieving children. It also provides some information about age appropriate ways to help as well as useful websites to visit to seek further guidance.

What do children understand about death?

A child's understanding of grief is dependent on their age:

Children under 2: have no real understanding of death, but do fear being abandoned. They may search for the deceased person and wonder where they are. The child may also be clingy and want lots of cuddles and comforting.

Ages 2-4: Children at this age do not understand the permanency of death and will often ask questions like "When is Daddy coming home?" They may use role play games to act out what is happening around them and to try to make sense of the situation.

Ages 5-9: This is the age when children have 'magical thinking'. They may think that they can cause death by their words or actions, or may think of death as being like monsters or bogeymen. They may become preoccupied by death and may need to explore feelings of guilt and responsibility.

Ages 10-13: Children at this age begin to have a more 'adult' understanding of death in that they understand its permanency and lasting impact upon their life. They are more likely to understand that the death will mean changes to their life and need support managing this change.

13 & over: From adolescence, children have the same understanding of death as adults. They will share many of the same fears and feelings as adults and will also be susceptible to the same grief difficulties as adults who suffer loss.

What to expect:

- Younger children may have periods where they move quickly from being happy at play to being upset. They may also regress in some of their behaviour (e.g. bedwetting, thumb-sucking etc.).
- If they are too young to verbalise their feelings or feel uncomfortable doing so, they may act out their feelings (e.g. anger, frustration, anxiety etc.).
- Older children may not cry outwardly as they may feel embarrassed or be worried about causing more stress for others around them.
- Children who are feeling a lot of fear or anxiety may have this manifest in sleep problems. This is one of the key indicators that a child is having difficulty with their grief.

- Some children (particularly younger children) will get very clingy and needy.
- Feelings of abandonment are particularly strong when the person who dies is a parent. This usually results in a fear that the remaining parent may also leave them.

How to help:

- Let the child be a part of the grieving process and allow them to see others cry or be upset. This will allow them to know that it is normal and OK to be sad.
- Answer all their questions in a truthful and age appropriate way. Disguising the truth will only lead to feelings of mistrust later. However, don't flood them with information – give them time to process and be guided by their questions.
- Absolve them of any guilt and involvement in the death. Children are egocentric and believe that they are responsible for what happens in their world.
- Encourage them to express their feelings; this can be done through music, play, art (e.g. drawing), talking etc. This is especially important for younger children who do not have the capacity to verbally express how they are feeling.
- Let children know, in an age appropriate way, about the feelings they may experience as part of the grieving process. Give them permission to feel sad and talk with them about strategies they can use to help them when they are feeling upset or overwhelmed.
- Keep them in their normal routine as much as possible, making sure that others around them (e.g. schools, sporting groups etc.) are advised of the loss and given information about how to support the child.



Useful resources and websites

- <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/understand.html>
- http://www.bereavementcare.com.au/articles/bereaved_children.htm
- http://www.himh.org.au/client_images/876483.pdf

Contact Us:

W www.suicideprevention.salvos.org.au

E admin.hopeforlife@aue.salvationarmy.org

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