

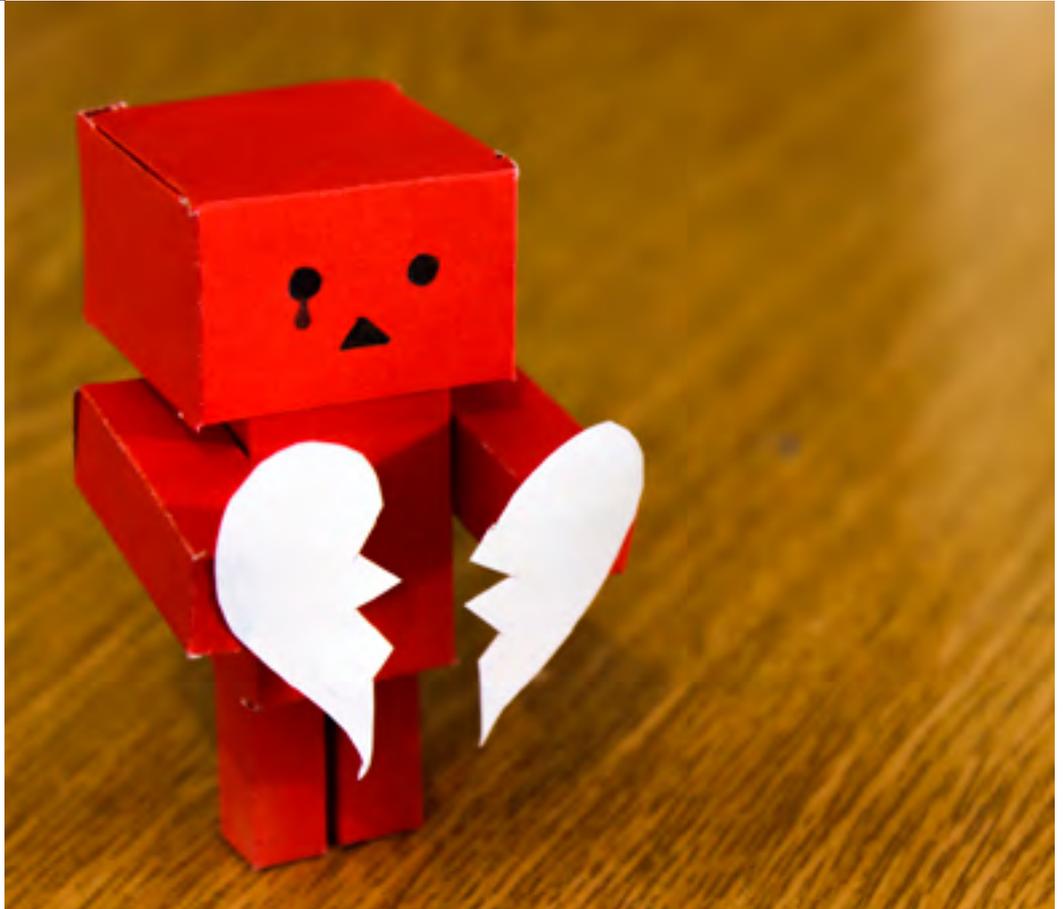
# Grief and loss

Growing up is an ongoing process of change for children that involves times of loss as well as times of gain. Children grieve from an early age, but not in the same way as adults. They often grieve in bursts and can show their feelings in their behaviour and play.

Changes such as losing a family member, moving to a new home, family break-up or starting child care or school bring new feelings, challenges and learning for children. The support they receive at these times help children learn to manage and deal with losses that will happen throughout their lives.

# ParentLink

informing  supporting  connecting



## When children grieve

Children can feel grief and loss over the same things as adults, for example:

- a parent or family member dying
- parents separating or the family breaking up
- the loss of a friend or friendship
- moving house or changing schools
- having a disability
- being in hospital
- the loss of a pet
- loss of culture and homeland when moving to a new country
- loss related to crises, e.g. fire, flood, accident or other community tragedy (see ParentLink Guide 'Dealing with a crisis').

Children can also grieve over things that seem small to adults but are big to them, e.g. losing a special toy, comforter or other possession.



**ACT**  
Government

A PARENTLINK PARENTING GUIDE  
[www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)

# Children's understanding of death and loss

## Preschool children

In the preschool years children don't understand that death is forever. They feel grief when they lose someone close to them. The impact of the loss may be greater because they don't really understand what's happening. They don't understand what is real and what is not real and may think they have caused what happened. They may be more clingy and needy and have trouble separating from you.

Losing someone who cares for them is a major stress for children. It takes time and love and care to overcome.

## Early primary school

Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent and to realise that when someone dies they are not coming back. Some children may feel responsible for the death or separation and think it was because of something they did. They may also worry about who will look after them. If they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well.

They may be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death and want lots of information such as what happens to the body. They may need to hear what has happened many times over. They may not know what it is they are feeling or have the words to say how they feel. They may show their feelings in their behaviour and play.

Children feel grief and loss from a young age. They need your help to deal with their feelings.

## Later primary school

Children now understand that death is permanent. They can also understand why death happens, e.g. because of illness, accident or old age. They can talk about their feelings better although they might not always do so. They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, e.g. blame one parent for a divorce. They have a strong sense of right and wrong and might have strong views about what has happened.

They may be interested in life after death and ask questions about it. They may still want to know all the facts about what happens to the body or details of an accident.

As they get older, children are more able to understand what other people are going through.

## Teenagers

Teenagers grieve in much the same way as adults. At this stage in their development they often have emotional 'ups and downs' and can become deeply distressed. They can grieve over the break-up of friendships and relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close. They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody. They may want to spend more time with friends than family, but they still need to know you are there to talk to if needed.

Young people often show their sadness through angry behaviours that cover up their underlying feelings. Some may turn to drugs or alcohol, drive too fast or do other dangerous things. These young people need lots of support.

Others just need to do active and noisy things, e.g. go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends. Some may find comfort in art, music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief.

## How children show grief

Each child experiences loss differently. It can depend on their age, maturity and 'connectedness' with the person or whatever is lost. They can grieve in bursts and seem OK one moment and not the next.

Young children especially don't have the words to talk about their feelings. They may not really know what they feel. Their grief can lead to more demanding behaviour as they try to get closeness, care, information or reassurance from you. Some of the ways children show grief are:

- physical pain, e.g. tummy aches, headaches
- sleeping problems, bad dreams, wetting the bed
- eating too much or too little
- angry play or playing the same thing over and over
- being aggressive towards parents, friends or toys
- temper tantrums
- being destructive



- being mean to others
- being sad and easily upset
- showing fears
- not wanting to be left alone
- acting like a younger child
- acting more like an adult
- not being able to concentrate for long
- problems with school work
- wanting to be left alone or not wanting to talk
- crying or giggling without obvious reason
- 'switching off' and acting as if nothing has happened
- running away, avoiding school, stealing
- taking risks, using alcohol or drugs.

Each child experiences grief and loss differently. It is important to work out what will best help each child.

## Extra stresses for children

There can be extra stress for children when:

- parents or other adults are so upset they are not available to support children
- routines are suddenly changed
- people around them act differently, are upset, crying or not keeping to routines
- there are new situations to cope with, e.g. funerals, moving house
- they are asked to be different, e.g. be quiet, be helpful, be good
- they are not really sure what to think or do.

When a parent dies children need to feel they will not be abandoned.

## What parents can do

### Help children express their feelings

- Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings. Provide an environment where they feel safe to express their feelings in whatever way they can.
- Help them find ways to express their feelings, e.g. through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing or music.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share their worries. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. You may have to answer the same questions over and over as children try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk you could open the way by saying something like 'Some things are hard to talk about but talking things through can really help.'
- If you can't talk about it, find someone you both trust that they can talk to, e.g. aunty, uncle, grandparent, teacher or counsellor. If children can't talk about the loss they may feel that it is not safe to talk about it and continue to have muddled or scary feelings.

### Share your feelings

- Share your feelings and tell children you are sad too — it helps them accept their feelings if they know others feel the same.
- Tell children how you are managing your feelings. Even if you are sad, it shows them that grief can be coped with. You will help them understand grief is a normal part of life.
- If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share this too much with children — they need to feel you are in control and can keep them safe.

## Grief and loss

It is important to look after yourself too. Talking with a friend and sharing your feelings can really help. Seek professional help if you need it.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

© Department of Health and Ageing, Government of South Australia (revised 05/15). Reproduced with permission and adapted by the ACT Government to reflect Australian Capital Territory laws (11/16).

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

Published by ParentLink, Community Services Directorate  
GPO Box 158 Canberra ACT 2601

e [parentlink@act.gov.au](mailto:parentlink@act.gov.au)  
t 13 34 27

**Looking  
for more  
information?**

ACT Government Publication No. 16/1363 (November 2016)

## What parents can do *continued*

### Be honest

- Tell children what's happened simply and honestly in ways that suit their age and development. This helps them find ways to cope.
- If you don't tell children you may prevent them from dealing with the loss. It may cause problems when they have other losses later in life.
- Children need to know what's happened even if they don't ask.

### Provide routine and support

- Stick to family routines as much as you can — doing the same things as usual helps children feel safe. Keep to the same rules about what children are allowed to do.
- Make extra time to spend with children and teenagers — they will need closeness and comfort.

- If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and adults.
- When the time feels right help your child or teenager to move on and try something new.

### Involve children in funerals and ceremonies

- When children or teenagers have lost someone close it can help to have a role in a funeral service or ceremony, or to remember the person in a special way
- Sharing emotions and feeling connected with others can be a great support.
- You could create your own way of remembering the person, e.g. release some balloons or plant a tree.

Let your school or child care centre know what's happening — they can keep an eye on your child and may offer counselling or other support.

## When your child needs extra help

Seek help from a professional that knows about grief if your child or teenager:

- talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- seems to be preoccupied with death
- is acting angrily, crying, sad or depressed much of the time
- is unable to concentrate or is 'withdrawn' at school months later
- doesn't want to join in or play with other children months later.



ParentLink — for other parenting guides, online parenting information  
[www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support  
[www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres)

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens  
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>