

Grief & loss responses in children

Grief and loss responses in a child are not always obvious, sometimes they are acute and affect the child physically as well as emotionally.

Recognising grief and loss for children as a unique experience helps parents and caregivers better address their specific needs. Common grief responses in children include:

- Butterflies in the stomach
- Headaches
- Angry outbursts
- Nightmares
- Challenging behaviour at school
- Refusal to attend school
- Lack of focus and concentration
- Withdrawal from the family or a particular parent

Some of these responses in the child may also be difficult for the parent or carer to manage and as a parent you may find yourself feeling angry, hurt or want to withdraw for the child. It is important to recognise that the child's response is very normal and natural for their developmental stage and that they may not have the words to express what is happening for them or they may be confused, shocked or overwhelmed by what is happening and are responding in a way which makes sense for them.



Young children may not understand that the loss may be permanent, (in the case of death or divorce) and they may ask many questions about the permanent change or they may withdraw and not ask any questions. Each child and adolescent is different. A child may believe that the loss is somehow linked to something they have done. During this time, the need to feel loved, protected and cared for may be experienced as a demand or that they are being unreasonable. It is important to know that these behaviours may be exhibited when a person is feeling scared, unsafe, fearful and confused.

During this time, providing comfort and reassurance and maintaining the routines which have been in place can support the child who has experienced loss and is grieving. Routines will provide them with a sense of security and predictability. When loss and grief issues are recognised particularly within a safe, open and sensitive manner, the child may not feel so alone or disengaged from their family, friends, social groups or at school.

Supporting the whole family

Grief affects the entire family unit. While focusing on children's needs, it's equally important to support the adults in their lives:

Parental wellbeing: parents and caregivers must take care of their own mental health to provide consistent support.

Family communication: openly discuss the loss as a family and allow everyone to share their feelings.

Professional help: don't hesitate to seek counselling for both children and adults if needed.



EAST for Children

You may also find the following EAST self-care guide helpful in re-establishing some practical patterns prior to the experience of loss

Eating: ensure the child eats regularly and healthily, increasing their water intake during the day.

Activities: restart activities, which you know they enjoyed prior to their loss.

Sleeping: ensure that they go to bed at the same time, which they would have done prior to this loss. Ensure that they avoid eating high sugar foods or a large meal prior to sleep.

Time: organise times in discussion with the child for them to catch up with friends or organise a sleepover at home.

What are the symptoms of a child with traumatic grief?

Traumatic grief occurs when a child struggles to integrate the loss into their life due to the circumstances surrounding the death.

Symptoms

Flashbacks or nightmares related to the death.

Avoidance of places or people that remind them of the loss.

Difficulty trusting others or forming relationships.

Intervention

Seek professional support to address the trauma.

Introduce therapeutic tools like play therapy or art therapy.

Help the child build a sense of safety and stability.

How primary school-aged children perceive death

Children aged 6–12 are beginning to understand that death is permanent. However, younger children in this group may still engage in magical thinking, believing that they can reverse or outwit death. This stage of understanding can lead to increased curiosity about death and even fears about their own mortality. Providing grief and loss for children in this age group includes using clear language and offering consistent reassurance about their safety and loved ones.

Common concerns

- Fear that their actions may have caused the death.
- Anxiety about who will take care of them if another loved one dies.
- Misunderstandings due to metaphors like “passed away” or “sleeping forever,” which can cause unnecessary confusion.

How to address this

- Use clear, age-appropriate language such as “grandma has died, and that means her body has stopped working.”
- Encourage questions and answer them honestly, without glossing over the truth.
- Reassure them that the death was not their fault.

Helping children express their grief

Providing opportunities for expression is key to helping children navigate their grief. Consider activities that suit their personality and interests:

Creative outlets:

Drawing, painting, or crafting (e.g., making a memory box).

Writing letters or poems to the deceased.

Engaging in storytelling or reflective journaling.

Physical activities:

Dancing, playing sports, or other forms of exercise to release pent-up emotions.

Participatory rituals:

Letting them decide if they want to attend the funeral or contribute to a memorial service.



Referral resources for parents

Kids Helpline

For kids, teens and young adults aged 5 to 25 years, this free helpline is accessible 24/7. Call 1800 551 800 anytime, for any reason, or visit: <https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

Headspace

Supporting young people with their mental health and wellbeing. Call the free helpline 1800 650 890 or visit <https://headspace.org.au/> for more information about their programs and services.

Feel the Magic

Providing early intervention grief education programs for kids aged 7 – 17 years who are experiencing pain and isolation due to the death of a parent, guardian or sibling. Visit <https://feelthemagic.org.au/> for more information.



Visit our website for your choice of free and immediate grief and loss support including a national helpline, online forums, support groups, self-care resources and information.

➤ Visit

griefline.org.au
available 24/7

➤ Call

1300 845 745
365 days

➤ Scan the QR code



Griefline is not a crisis-support or emergency support service

If you are in an emergency situation or are at immediate risk of harming yourself or others, please call 000.

If you are experiencing crisis, or worried about yourself or someone else, please contact [Lifeline](https://lifeline.org.au) 13 11 14. [Kids Helpline](https://kidshelpline.com.au) is available to support young people aged five to 25, call 1800 551 800

