

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

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Children and Grief

REMEMBER:

- *Grief is a normal reaction to loss*
- *Responses vary between individuals and the circumstances of their loss*
- *There are some common reactions to grief in children*
- *Parental support in times of grief helps the process of healing*
- *Get professional support if the grief is severe or prolonged*

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Grief is when a person has undergone a significant loss in their lives. It could be anything that is important to that adult or child.

The loss could be the death of someone, an animal, a separation or divorce, loss of a friendship, loss of a home, or homeland.

Grief is a normal reaction to any loss. Responses vary according to the age, the personality of the child and the circumstances of their grief.

Grief may be expressed in many ways, with many factors influencing this - age, culture and the immediate environment.

Children's Responses to Grief

It is important for children to have permission to talk about their loss no matter what their age.

However children cannot always verbalise their emotions. Children will frequently express grief through their 'play'. Through play children process or 'act out' their grieving. The 'play' may incorporate death, hospitals, moving, people leaving - whatever is relevant to them.

Common Reactions of Children to Loss

Children do not always show their grief in the same ways as adults do. They may appear not to be affected by the event and not show their grief. We do not need to be alarmed if they are not very upset by what has happened. They may not be affected significantly or may not show their grief until much later.

But children can display grief in a variety of forms. For instance they may display uncharacteristic negative behaviours.

Some children may feel guilt about their loss as they may have had conflict with the person prior to their leaving or death. They may also blame themselves for the loss.

Children may also be worried about the other people in their lives and need reassurance that you or some other important figure is not going to leave or die.

Going back to an earlier stage of their development is common and quite normal when children have experienced a significant loss. This may be in the form of clinginess, toileting issues, and sleep disturbances.

At times children will not show their grief. Age will have some influence in this. This may be their initial response and even some months later.

How long does grieving take to 'get over'?

The time taken to grieve is different for everybody. The importance of the loss and how it has been dealt with influences the length of time to grieve. Anniversaries of the event may trigger some of the strong emotions felt earlier on in the loss.

How can you offer support?

Support for children can be offered by giving them "permission" to express emotions.

Children may ask many questions over the loss they are experiencing, answering these in an open and honest way allows children to gain a better understanding of what has happened. If you are unclear of how to answer then say you don't know, you don't know how to explain it, or that you will talk about it later.

Provide factual information about the event to children. If not provided with information they may use their imagination and create unhelpful or inaccurate stories about what has happened. This may lead to confusion.

It is OK for you to cry when talking about the loss if you are upset. Explain why you are crying e.g. you miss the person.

Providing hugs and reassurance is a way of enabling children to know you care.

It is healthy to talk about the positive aspects of the relationship the child had with the person the child lost. In the case of separation between parents, try to provide an atmosphere where the children have permission to talk about the non custodial parent if they wish.

When there has been a separation see if the person who has left can send taped messages, write letters, make phone calls. Consideration needs to be taken into account if the child has been in an abusive situation with this person in the past.

It is positive for children to express their emotions. But remember some children, especially young children, have difficulty talking about their emotions. If this is the case don't force them to.

If the child displays aggressive or destructive behaviours, acknowledge the difficulty they are going through but make it clear this cannot be tolerated. Discuss with the child other ways in handling their anger, frustrations etc.

In the case of a death give children the opportunity to be involved in the practicalities such as being involved in the funeral. Even though this may be very upsetting for the child it is a normal part of the grieving. Give the child a choice to the level of involvement they want. If they are not comfortable, do not force them.

Getting Help

If your child's grief has been severe or long lasting, you may need to get professional assistance to support your child.