

Grief and bereavement

Helping children and youth cope with death

At some point, we all face the death of someone we love. This is a difficult experience for a person of any age, but is especially hard for children and youth. Adults may be unsure about how to respond to the needs of children and youth when they are experiencing grief. Adults may be overwhelmed with their own grief. Or they may wonder about how to explain death to a child in ways a child can understand. Children and youth may still become overwhelmed by grief, even when adults are doing their very best to help.

This fact sheet will help parents and caregivers understand how children and youth are affected by death. It will also outline what parents, caregivers, family and friends can do to support a grieving child or teen.



How do children and youth understand death?

The way a child or teen understands death depends on age and developmental level.

Age 0-2:

Babies and toddlers can't understand the concept of death. In their eyes, their loved one (a parent, for example) is simply not there anymore. They will react as they would if they were separated from or abandoned by that person. They may respond in many ways:

- Expressing frustration with any change in caregiver;
- Becoming more clingy;
- Not appearing to care at all.

Age 2-6:

Preschool children are beginning to understand the concept of death. But they see death as reversible, and believe that dead people can come back to life (a lot like going to sleep and waking up). Because they believe adults are powerful, they may also believe that the adult chose to die on purpose. Preschoolers are also self-centered, and may think the death has something to do with them. For example, some preschoolers believe that they caused the death or that the death is a punishment for something they've done. Or they may believe that they can bring their loved one back.

Age 6-11:

School-aged children are able to understand that death is permanent. But they may still have trouble understanding why their loved one had to die.

Age 12+:

Teens are able to fully understand that death happens to everyone, and that it is permanent. Even so, teens tend to see themselves as invincible, and that death happens to other people.



How do children and youth respond to death?

Like adults, there are many ways that children and youth may respond to the death of a loved one. A loved one may be a person, but may also be a beloved pet.

Children and youth may respond to death with:

Sadness: This is a typical reaction to loss.

Anger: Children and youth often feel their loss is not fair, causing them to see the world as an unfair place. This can lead to anger and irritability. They may direct these feelings towards themselves, or take them out on others.

Anxiety: Losing a loved one can leave children and youth with the feeling that the world is a dangerous and unsafe. As a result, they may have worries and fears about dying or losing other people they love. They may become clingy, and have trouble leaving a parent or caregiver.

Shock or denial: Children and youth can be so overwhelmed with their loss that they try to avoid facing or dealing with it. They may avoid talking about it or behave as if it didn't happen.

Guilt: In some cases, children and youth blame themselves for the death. "Maybe if I didn't give dad such a hard time..." "Maybe if I hadn't told grandma that I hated her that time..."

Problems at home or school: After the loss of a loved one, children and youth may:

- Struggle with school work;
- Withdraw from everyday activities;
- Develop behaviour problems;
- Refuse to follow direction from adults;
- Express anger and sadness with aggressive or defiant behaviour.

Acceptance: With time, children and youth are usually able to accept the loss and learn to live with it. They go on with their lives, and are able to talk about the loss.

Talking to children and youth about death

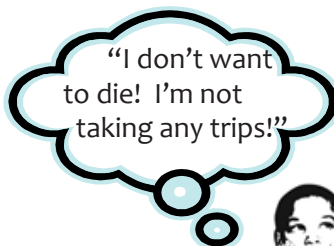
Keep it simple. Young children take things very literally. Being open and honest will help young children begin to understand that death is final. For example, it's best to say something like, "Grandpa died last night".

Think about how children may interpret what you say.

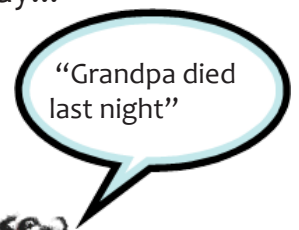
If you say...



Your child might think...



Instead, say...



If you say...

"Grandma's just having a long, long sleep..."



Your child might think...

"I don't want to go to sleep-I may never wake up!"



Instead, say...

"Grandma died."



If you say...

"Uncle Jack got sick and died"



Your child might think...

"I have a cold, maybe I'm going to die too!!"



Instead, say...

"Uncle Jack had the kind of sickness that doesn't happen often. He got so sick that the medicine couldn't make him better."



If you say...

"Aunt Aliya went to the hospital and died."



Your child might think...

"When you go to hospital, you die! I don't ever want to go to the hospital!"



Instead, say...

"Usually, sick people get better when they go to the hospital. But Aunt Aliya was so sick that she died."

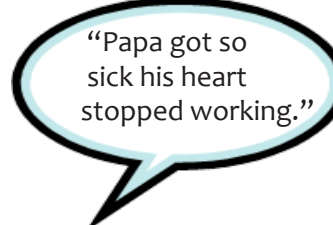


Use age appropriate language.

For an older child, you can say:

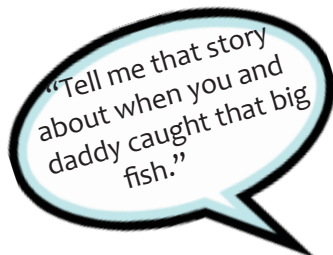


For a younger child, you can say:



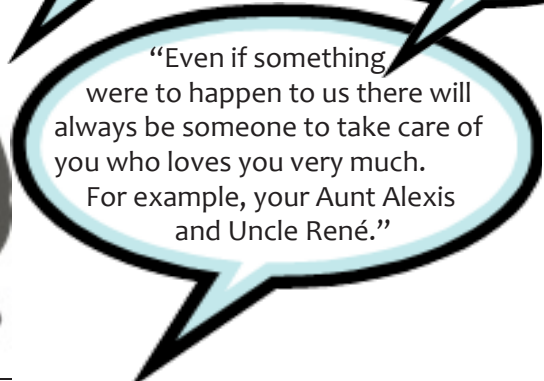
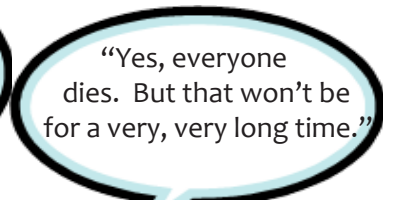
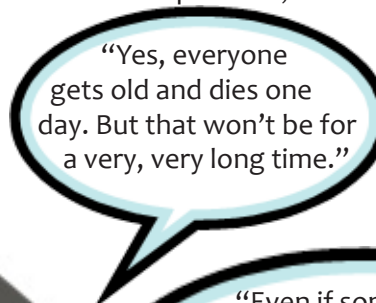
Give opportunities to talk about loved ones.

This helps children and youth to accept the loss. And give a chance to talk about positive memories.



Handling questions

It can be helpful to ask children and youth if they have any worries, even before they ask questions. This allows you to focus directly on their concerns. After you respond, check back with your child or teen, "Does that answer your question? Any other questions or worries that you have?" Some common questions, and sample responses:



Older children and teens

As they mature, older children and teens may ask more abstract, philosophical questions. This is an excellent opportunity to talk about beliefs around death and sources of meaning in our lives.

There are no easy answers to these kinds of questions. What's most important is your willingness to explore these questions in an open way. This is a good chance to share your point of view, and this could end up being a very deep, meaningful conversation. If religion and spirituality play a role in your life, they will likely guide your responses.



“What is the purpose of life if I am going to die anyway?”
 “Who am I?”
 “What’s the point?”

Helping children and youth handle their feelings

Accept and respect your child’s feelings

Reassure your child or teen that shock, disbelief, sadness, guilt and anger are all common reactions to death. Show that you understand their pain, and offer support. For example, if you see that your child or teen is sad and upset, it's not helpful to say “Don’t be sad!” Instead, say something like, “Yes, it is very sad that David died. I know this is hard for you. I love you, and we’ll get through this. How about a hug?”

Offer reassurance. After the death of a loved one, remind your child or teen that:

- You will always love and care for them;
- They are not to blame for the death;
- They could not have prevented the death.

Accept and explore negative feelings

Children and youth sometimes become “stuck” in their grieving process. This may happen if the child is having negative feelings about the loved one. Anger and guilt are common. It can help to talk about these feelings, and explore them out in the open.

“We all get upset or angry with people we care about. Maybe you felt like that with Dev sometimes. Would you like to talk about it?”

Supporting your child or teen

It's natural that children and youth will need their parents and caregivers more when they are faced with loss. You may notice that your child or teen is more ‘clingy’ or needy than usual. Show your love and support by:

- Spending time together (just the two of you, if possible);
- Share lots of physical affection: hold hands, hug, kiss, sit close.
- When saying ‘goodnight’ or ‘goodbye’, remind your child when you’ll be together again.

“See you tonight... remember-we’re going to the park!”

“Good night-see you in the morning!”

Religion and Spirituality

It's important to share any religious or spiritual beliefs you have about death. And include children and youth in funerals, burials, or memorial services. Most children are able to go to these memorials. Prepare children and youth ahead of time for what will happen, but be ready to answer questions during the service. If a child does not want to attend, ask why. For example, “What are you worried about?” If the child still doesn't want to go despite your best efforts, it is best to not force the issue.

As time goes by ...

There will be times that are more challenging than others. Anniversaries, of one kind or another, can trigger fresh waves of grief. For example:

- A few weeks or months after the death, when support from others drops off;
- The one year anniversary of the death;
- Holidays and birthdays.



During these times, check more closely on how your child or teen is doing. Remembering is natural and healthy. Anniversary periods are a good time to:

- Talk and laugh about your loved one;
- Look at photo albums;
- Do something in honour of your loved one;
- Visit the cemetery or your loved one's resting place.

Grieving can take a long time. Even if it seems like children and youth have completed the grieving process, they may need more support later. They may go through grieving periods again as they go through developmental stages. For example, a toddler may react with frustration at the change in caregivers when her mother dies, but isn't able to talk about her grief. As she grows older, she begins to be able to express her sadness with words. Years later, she may experience grief at her mother not being able to see her graduate.

When to Get Help

It is normal for children and youth to feel sad, experience some anger, anxiety, guilt, or have behaviour problems when grieving. Children and youth need help from a professional if they start to feel hopeless or have thoughts of suicide. These thoughts may range from thinking that life isn't worth living, to actively wanting to do things to end their lives.

If you notice big changes in a child or teen's behaviour, check with your family doctor, pediatrician, or school social worker for further help.

Helpful resources

Grief and bereavement organizations:

Many communities have organizations for bereaved families that provide monthly meetings, workshops and other activities to support children, youth and families. For example:

Bereaved families Ontario

Ottawa Chapter <http://www.bfo-ottawa.org/> Cornwall Chapter <http://bfocornwall.ca/>

You may also find it helpful to turn to:

- Spiritual leaders (your Rabbi, Imam, priest or hospital spiritual support person).
- School or hospital social workers.
- Health care provider.
- Funeral home staff. They will be able to provide information about local bereavement support services.

Books

Lifetimes: A beautiful way to explain death to children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

The Children Who Lived: Using Harry Potter and other fictional characters to help grieving children and adolescents by Kathryn A. Markell and Marc A. Markell

Ida, Always by Caron Lewis and Charles Santoso

The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers

Don't Despair on Thursdays! The children's grief-management book by Adolph J. Moser

Howard B. Wigglebottom listens to a friend: A fable about loss and healing by Howard Binkow

The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers

To see the CHEO Library's grief and bereavement resource list of books, visit:

<http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/griefbereavement>

About this Document

Written by members of the Mental Health Information Committee of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), an interdisciplinary group that includes psychiatry, psychology, child/youth care, social work, nursing, and occupational therapy.

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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.



References

American Academy of Paediatrics, The Paediatrician and Childhood Bereavement, Paediatrics, 105(2), Feb 2000, retrieved June 1, 2011 from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/105/2/445.full>

Finding help in Ottawa

In a crisis? Child, Youth and Family Crisis Line for Eastern Ontario, 613-260-2360 or toll-free, 1-877-377-7775

Looking for mental health help? www.eMentalHealth.ca is a bilingual directory of mental health services and resources for Ottawa, Eastern Ontario and Canada.

- Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Youth Services Bureau, for ages 12-20, 613-562-3004 www.ysb.on.ca
- Family Service Centre of Ottawa, 613-725-3601, www.familyservicesottawa.org
- Catholic Family Services, 613-233-8418, www.cfssfc-ottawa.org
- Jewish Family Services, 613-722-2225, www.jfsottawa.com
- The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre (by physician's referral), 613-737-7600 ext. 2496. For more information on our programs, www.cheo.on.ca
- Ottawa Public Health Information Line, 613-580-6744
- To find a Psychologist in Ottawa: Call the Ottawa Academy of Psychology referral service, 613-235-2529. Listing many, but not all, Ottawa psychologists.

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- Kids Help Phone 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca
- Renfrew County: Phoenix Centre for Children, Youth and Families, with offices in Renfrew and Pembroke. 613-735-2374 or toll-free 1-800-465-1870, www.renc.igs.net/~phoenix
- Leeds and Grenville County: Children's Mental Health of Leeds and Grenville, with offices in Brockville, Elgin, Gananoque and Prescott. 613-498-4844, www.cmhlg.ca
- Lanark County: Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth, with offices in Carleton Place, Smiths Falls and Perth. 613-283-8260, www.opendoors.on.ca
- Stormont, Dundas, Glengarry and Akwesasne (Cornwall Island): Single Point Access-for all child, youth, family and mental health services. Services in French and English. Main office, Cornwall, Ontario 613-938-9909 Toll free 1-888-286-KIDS (5437). Satellite office in Winchester.
- Cornwall and area: Child and Youth Counselling Services (CYCS)- (Cornwall Community Hospital) provides assessment, therapy, and counseling. Services provided in English. Office in Cornwall 613-932-1558, limited outreach services in Winchester office.
- To find a psychologist anywhere in Ontario: College of Psychologists of Ontario, 1-800-489-8388, www.cpo.on.ca

