

Special Populations Children's Grief

**You're not alone.
We're here to support.**

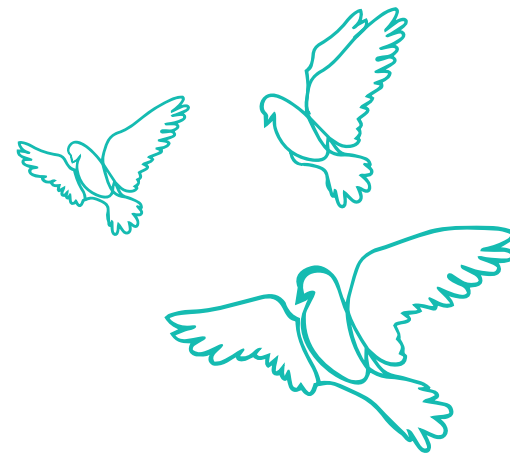
There is no timeline for grief. Knowing there are supports and resources available can give hope as you move through your grief.

Children feel the pain of grief emotionally, physically, spiritually, and cognitively (mind health). Depending on developmental stage and age, their developing brains are not yet able to fully process the complexities of grief or manage the intense emotions that come with it.

Children will outwardly express their grief – this is a child's natural response and not purposeful misbehaviour. It is important that caregivers understand this difference, while introducing and practicing coping skills with the child to support healthy grieving.

There are several factors that can impact a child's grief responses and expression:

- Age and developmental stage.
- Relationship with the person who died.
- Cause of death and if this has been explained to the child in an honest, age-appropriate way.
- Prior grief experiences, or if this is the child's first experience with death and grief.
- Family, religious, or cultural beliefs and values.
- Child's previous ability to manage/cope with stress.
- Impact of the death (witnessing trauma, changes in caregivers, relocation).



Grief Reactions Based on Age

0-2

Infancy/Toddlerhood

Children at this age are unable to understand death. They are aware, however, that someone who cared for them is no longer present and experience separation anxiety.

Grief Responses

Changes in behaviour are observed. Infants or toddlers may appear agitated or difficult to settle/soothe due to changes in environment, caregiver, and routine. Infants and toddlers may request to be held more, present with increased crying, sleeping concerns, and/or stomach-related issues.

3-5

Young Childhood

Children at this age present with "Magical Thinking". This leads them to believe that they somehow caused the death or somehow can bring the person back.

Grief Responses

Grief processing will shift between "grief, play, grief, play...". Children at this age will experience intense feelings and have difficulty self-regulating their emotions independently. They may experience increased irritability due to changes in environment, caregiver, and routine. A regression of behaviour may be witnessed (thumb sucking, bed wetting, etc.). Children can present as confused and raise concerns about their own safety.

6-10

Middle Childhood

Children at this age present as "Concrete Thinkers". If loss is due to death, they begin to suspect that they may die as they begin to understand death as final and inevitable.

Grief Responses

They may develop an interest in causes of death and what happens to a body after death. They begin to search for reasons for death, through asking questions. Children may experience intense feelings of sadness, anger, and guilt. Children may have difficulty paying attention in class, concentrating in school, and completing schoolwork.

11-14

Older Childhood

Children at this age understand death as final and unavoidable. They may begin to show concern and worry for their own and others' futures as a result of the death. At this stage, children may be focused on finding out answers to questions surrounding their loved one's death.

Grief Responses

Children may present with unpredictable moods (ups and downs or moodiness), increased anger, and may take part in risk-taking activities. Like children in the early stages, older children may experience appetite and/or sleeping changes. Children may have difficulty paying attention/concentrating in school, and completing schoolwork. They may withdraw from others, experience anxiety, and/or suicidal thoughts.

15-18

Adolescents

Teens may appear to be handling grief in a mature and adult manner. However, they have not reached the developmental stage and the experience of grief can be extremely difficult and painful for teens during this already difficult life phase.

Grief Responses

Teens may withdraw from others. They may worry that they will be treated differently by peers, may be preoccupied by death, engage in risk-taking behaviours, and may internalize emotions (appearing as not being affected by loss). Teens may present with low energy, experience appetite, and/or sleeping changes. They may experience fear, guilt, sadness, and/or oversensitivity and may have difficulty paying attention/concentrating in school, and completing schoolwork.

When to seek out professional supports

- If you notice that they are demonstrating extreme changes in their behaviour.
- If they are demonstrating risk, self-harming, or self-destructive behaviours.
- If you are noticing extreme acting out, destructive, or impulsive behaviours.
- If the grieving process seems to be interfering with their daily functioning.
- If they are demonstrating or expressing any suicidal thoughts.
- If you are unsure and feel that you and the child would benefit from support.

Like adults, each child will react to grief differently and waves of grief may appear suddenly with different levels of intensity. The above list is a guide and it is important to remember that a child's grief and healing is based on their age, developmental stage, and their own personal needs at different points in time.

Canadian Mental Health Association Windsor-Essex County Branch. Parenting Through Grief Education Seminar.
Hooyma, N. R., Kramer, B. J., & Sanders, S. (2021). Living through loss: Interventions across the life span. Columbia University Press.
Walter, C., McCoyd, J., & Koller, J. (2022). Grief and loss across the lifespan: A biopsychosocial perspective. Springer Publishing Company, LLC.

Tips and Strategies

- ✓ It is always best that a child learn about a death from a caregiver, or a closely connected family member.
- ✓ Talk about the death in the context of the cycle of life (in and at an age-appropriate level).
- ✓ Children will have many questions. Answer these questions honestly with factual information, using words (developmental phrases) they will understand. They will often need these questions answered repeatedly.
- ✓ Reassure them and reinforce that they understand death is not "contagious".
- ✓ Reassure them that they did not cause the death.
- ✓ Involve them in decisions about attending funerals or memorial services.
- ✓ Prepare them for what will occur, what they may see, and how others may react/behave at memorial activities.
- ✓ Provide lots of hugs, physical contact, comfort, and nurturing.
- ✓ Help them label the feelings they are experiencing. Teach and allow children to express their emotions in a way that is safe for themselves and others.
- ✗ **DO NOT** suggest that the child has grieved for long enough or "should get over it".
A child's grief can be delayed and will shift and change as they age and their understanding of death develops. There is no end date for grief, but it does become more manageable for a child over time.
- ✗ **DO NOT** act as if nothing has happened.
Children are very observant and feel changes in their environment and with those they are connected to (sense caregiver's emotional changes or stress). They are aware that someone has died (or no longer present) even if it is not discussed.
- ✗ **DO NOT** stop your child's expressions of grief - tears are healthy and an important way to release feelings, even many months after the death.
- ✗ **DO NOT** force children to take part in mourning activities (i.e., attend funerals, visit cemetery, look at pictures) if they refuse.
- ✗ **DO NOT** rely on your child for your own emotional support during your grief.

