

Bereavement & Loss

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(Developed from material produced by Worcester TaMHS)

- The death of a parent is one of the most traumatic experiences a child or young person can have.
- Children's grief is different to that of adults because of a number of factors.

Factors

1. Understanding of death is limited by age and cognitive development.
2. Limited ability to verbalise feelings.
3. Limited capacity to tolerate emotional pain.
4. Sensitivity to bereavement makes them different to peers.

0 – 2 years

- Children are thought to have no concept of death until they are around 2 years of age.
- They may experience grief due to separation from people but do not understand the finality of death.

3 – 5 years

- Children view death as similar to sleep.
- They do not understand that it is permanent or that eventually all living things must die.

5 – 9 Years

- Children realise the finality of death.
- Around 9 years children may become upset by the idea of death and in particular about the possibility that their parents might die.

9 – 12 years

- Children become aware of finality and the inevitability of death.
- They often experience some anxiety around thoughts of death and dying.

12 years into adolescence

- Greater acceptance of thoughts around death.
- Some become defiant of death, daring it to occur by playing games of 'chicken' or other risk-taking behaviour.
- As they grow they are vulnerable to re-experiencing their loss as understanding of death and its finality develops.

Other factors to consider

- Relationship with the deceased.
- Child or young person's personality.
- Previous experiences of death.
- Gender.
- Social support.

- The nature of the relationship that the child had with the person who died will impact upon how they react.
- The structure of the family will also be an important factor.
- The younger the child, the more acutely they will feel the loss of a mother as they are separated from their primary caregiver.

- The death of a father may be more significant for boys who will have lost a male role model.
- Some boys will feel it is their responsibility to take on the role of 'head of the house', which can be overwhelming as it is a role that they cannot cope with.

- The loss of a sibling may be particularly difficult for a child or young person, they may fear for their own safety and that of other family members.
- It is not unusual for them to experience guilt about things that they did or said, having survived or maybe about feeling glad they have their parents to themselves.

- Some children may try to take the place of their sibling by changing the things they do or how they behave.
- Parents may feel unable to talk about their own grief or support the grieving of the child.

- In circumstances where the relationship with the person who has died has been difficult or abusive, the child or young person may feel relief or display ambivalence about the death.

The grief process

There are a number of models of grieving for children. One of the most useful is that put forward by Morgan (1985) who suggests children's grief occurs in three phases.

3 Phases

- 1. Protest:** the child refuses to accept the person is dead. They may become angry and make attempts to get them back.
- 2. Hurt, despair and disorganisation:** there is an acceptance that the person has really gone. Feelings of abandonment and hostility towards the dead person are quite usual.
- 3. Hope:** they begin to adjust to life without the deceased person.

- It is difficult to put a timeframe around the grieving process.
- Circumstances before and after the bereavement will have a significant influence on how bereavement is experienced.

- Great uncertainty about the future can accompany the death of someone close.
- There can be worries about who will care for them or where they will live.
- It will probably not be in the power of the child or young person to resolve these questions.

Signs that a child or young person is not coping with their loss

They **may** show some of the following signs:

- Regression into an earlier stage of development
- Hostile reactions towards the person who has died
- Eating – loss of appetite, overeating, development of eating disorders

Signs that a child or young person is not coping with their loss

- Bed wetting
- Sleep disturbance
- Complaints of illness (may be some of the symptoms of the person who has died)
- Attempting to replace the deceased
- Adopting the mannerisms of the deceased
- Aggressive behaviour

Signs that a child or young person is not coping with their loss

- Learning problems
- Denial
- Withdrawal
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Panic

Signs that a child or young person is not coping with their loss

- Sadness or even short term depression are normal following a bereavement.
- If this continues, professional support should be sought.

Support

- Schools to address issues around death and grieving. SEAL resources may be useful, as may CRUSE and Noah's Ark.
- It is important to revisit this at each development stage to ensure that knowledge and understanding has kept pace with the cognitive, social and emotional development.

Support

- Look out for any changes in children which may suggest they are struggling with a bereavement.
- Some children or young people may stop attending school as they find it too overwhelming. It will be vital to address the issues as soon as possible to ensure difficulties do not become entrenched.

Support

Atkinson & Hornby (2002) developed the following guidelines:

- Deal with death in an open, sensitive manner in order to provide good role modelling.
- Anticipate and be aware of changes in behaviour, such as depression or lack of concentration following bereavement.

Support

- Discuss death in terms that children can understand.
- Provide information about death and grief appropriate to their developmental age.
- Encourage the adoption of healthy and effective coping strategies.
- Encourage children to express feelings verbally, through writing, drama or art work.

Support

- Ensure there are places children can go if upset. Provide them with a strategy to leave the classroom discreetly. Ensure younger children have the support of an adult.
- Promote constructive attitudes and approaches from peers towards bereaved children.

Support

- Deal with pupils who make cruel remarks.
- Create links with the child's home.