

Understanding Children's Grief



The way in which children experience and express grief after a significant loss in their lives is influenced by many things; the nature of the loss, the manner in which the loss occurs; their previous relationship with the lost person or object; personality; previous life experience including other losses; their physical and emotional health; developmental 'stage'; the familial and social environment in which the loss occurs; behaviour modelled by adults in their environment; and most importantly, the availability or otherwise of understanding and loving support.

The impact of loss affects children in very similar ways to those of adults, but their expressions of grief are often different, and therefore easily missed or misunderstood.

Whatever their age at the time the loss occurs, children may cry initially and later remain dry eyed even when adults around them are crying. Visually, the comparison between an expressive adult's grief and that of a child or adolescent may appear dramatically different, making it easy for adults to make sweeping pronouncements that 'children are resilient and get over things easily; they soon forget'. Remarks like this are inaccurate and often make children and young people angry. They feel as if their grief is minimised at best, believed to be non-existent at worst.

Children and young people frequently cry on the inside. Tears outwardly expressed make them feel embarrassed, different, and vulnerable. They desperately need to remain part of the group, no different to their peers; and they need to convince themselves that life will continue in a positive way despite their loss experience.

In grief, children and young people, like adults, tend to become an exaggerated version of their former selves. If they were socially outgoing before, they may become even more social and appear 'shallow' to adults who find the idea of social activities abhorrent. If they were previously shy or withdrawn, they may become more so in grief and concern adults who believe it is important to 'let go of the past and get on with life'. They may act out in anger at the world for destroying their hopes and illusions; at parents and other significant adults for not being able to prevent the event that is causing them pain. For example, four-year-old Timothy felt very angry with his parents for not saving the life of his little sister who died in fairly traumatic circumstances. Before this event he had seen them as wise and all-powerful, able to fix everything, able to make his world safe, manageable and predictable.

Sometimes children's anger is an attempt to invite their parents or other caregivers back into a parenting role. When parents grieve, the child or young person may feel abandoned or unimportant, as if they have lost not only the person who died, but those who grieve as well. Or they may fear that everything in their world is out of control and unconsciously try to challenge someone to restore order and predictability.

One of the most common and significant indicators of the distress experienced by grieving children manifests itself in SLEEP DISTURBANCES. The underlying emotion that results in sleep disturbances is usually fear, a pronounced aspect of children's grief. They may have difficulty going off to sleep, fear being in the dark, or wake from dreams that may be violent or traumatic. They may call out for comfort and reassurance, or seek safety and security in the warmth of someone else's bed. Whatever the story content of the dream, fears are usually about the possibility of their own death, or the death of someone else that is important to them. Almost every grieving child we have worked with has eventually expressed the belief that if they stay awake, or sleep with the person whose death they fear, they will notice changes in breathing, notice anything that might be wrong,

and be able to save their life. If they go to sleep, maybe they too won't wake up again; if they leave a bereaved parent to sleep alone, maybe the parent will be tempted to invite someone else into their bed and the deceased parent will be forgotten.

Allowing a grieving child to find comfort in the bed of another, however close the relationship is not a good long-term solution, even though it is an understandable one. After all, who in a grieving household is likely to have the energy to take the child back to bed, listen to their fears, provide reassurance, make the child's bedroom feel safe again, and stay until they are once again enveloped in sleep? It is much easier to allow the child to slip under the blankets and receive comfort from a wordless hug, especially if the parent or sibling also experiences comfort from the exchange. Many grieving families in these circumstances need understanding support and some creative suggestions so that children's anxieties can be addressed in ways that are helpful in the long term. It may be useful to read section 4 in 'The Grief of Our Children' (ABC Books, 1998), especially pages 158-159.

A heavy sense of responsibility is another common childhood grief reaction. If a sibling has died, the remaining child or children may feel as if they have to be of such value to their parents that they can fill the void left by the child who has died, that they can make the parents happy again, and give them a reason for living. So much to worry about; so much responsibility for life, death and other people.

We are happy to answer questions or make suggestions. Children are welcome to do the same. We hope in the near future to create a 'chat room' on our web site so that those who grieve or who care for grieving children can share experiences and helpful suggestions. We will also develop a 'chat room' for grieving children which we hope will feel empowering at a time of great vulnerability in their lives.



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