



Supporting children and young people affected by grief

Children and young people can need lots of reassurance and support from caring adults to help them come to terms with a major loss.

How long does grief last?

While grief is normal, feelings of anxiety or sadness may last a long time, especially if the child or young person loses a family member or if the loss occurs in traumatic circumstances.

People may seem to be coping today, but not so well tomorrow. Younger children can move in and out of grief very quickly – they may be very distressed one moment, then return to free play a few minutes afterwards. The intensity of feelings can change throughout the day, and grief can be triggered by memories or special occasions. Family members also move through grief at their own pace, so siblings may differ in their stage of recovery. Over time, most people gradually begin to feel more hopeful about the future.

Learn more about what [grief](#) looks like in children and young people.

What can educators do to help?

Knowing what to say and how to talk with children and young people about their loss and grief isn't

easy. If you have concerns, here are some ideas about how you can support them.

Acknowledge what has happened

Let the child or young person know you care and acknowledge their loss. For example, you might say:

- "I was sad to hear that..."
- "Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you."
- "I am here for you if you would like to talk."

Even if the child or young person doesn't want to talk, knowing there's someone who's aware of their situation and cares about them is helpful.

Acknowledge feelings

Let them talk about their feelings if they're ready to do so, ask them questions and offer your support. If they find it hard to explain how they feel, suggest some words (such as "angry" or "sad") to start a conversation. Show an interest in other parts of their life too, so that their grief isn't the only thing you talk about.

Plan support

Talk to the child or young person about supports that are available. Ask them if they have any ideas about what might be helpful. Discuss unobtrusive ways they can indicate that they're feeling overwhelmed and identify key people and places they can go, or resources they can use, until they're ready to return to the learning community. Children in early learning services may need guidance from educators to access supports which can be planned in collaboration with their families.

Honour their loss

Help the child or young person to honour their loss by doing something that's meaningful to them. Perhaps you could encourage them to write a diary, letter or song about their loss or collect personal possessions that will help them remember.

Offer additional help when needed

Grief may be more intense at particular times of the year such as anniversaries, birthdays and holidays. It may be helpful to speak with the child or young person's family, so you're aware of upcoming events or times that may be particularly difficult. Extra support at these important times can be very helpful.

Talk with leadership, wellbeing staff, psychologist or counsellor

Sometimes children and young people keep grief inside until they can't manage it by themselves anymore. If you think a child or young person's wellbeing is significantly affected by their grief, it's important to seek the support of a health professional.

Provide extra learning support

Falling behind at school can only make worries worse. Help school-aged children and young people catch up with their learning.

Maintain routines

Loss usually causes big changes in a child or young person's life. Keeping up normal routines, as much as possible reduces the number of changes and makes them feel more secure.

Access external support where necessary

Some children and young people may need support from a mental health professional to help them deal with their loss and grief. While most will feel better over time, a proportion of children and young people experience mental health issues such as [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If an individual doesn't seem to be recovering or is, in fact, getting worse over time, it's important to seek additional supports.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about providing support for children, young people and their families, by helping them access information and internal and external supports, in the module [Provide](#).

References

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (2018). Information on Grief and loss. Canberra: Australian National University. Retrieved from http://earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/files/ACAT_LGN_grief_and_loss.pdf

Thanasiu, P. & Pizza, N (2019): Constructing Culturally Sensitive Creative Interventions for Use with Grieving Children and Adolescents. Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, DOI: 10.1080/15401383.2019.1589402

Layne, C., Kaplow, J., Oosterhoff, B., Hill, R., & Pynoos, R. (2017). The interplay between posttraumatic stress and grief reactions in traumatically bereaved adolescents: When trauma, bereavement, and adolescence converge. Adolescent Psychiatry, 7: 4, 266-285.

External links

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network – [Grief and loss](#)

Better Health Channel – [Grief and loss](#)