

BEREAVEMENT, LOSS AND GRIEF—GUIDANCE 1

Developmental age and understanding

When supporting a child or young person it is important to take into account:

- ♦ Their age and current developmental stage.
- ♦ The age they were when the bereavement occurred.
- ♦ Understanding of death changes as children and young people develop.
- ♦ Children and young people's reactions are also influenced by other factors, including personality, previous experiences with death, gender differences, religious beliefs and support available from other family members.
- ♦ Children and young people do not move abruptly from one stage to the next and characteristics from each stage may overlap.

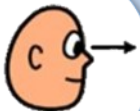
The ages and stages detailed below are a guideline and it is essential you take into account an individual's specific needs when using them as a guide.

0-2 years



Concept of death

- Have no understanding of the concept of death
- May experience the loss as a separation from someone they were attached to who is no longer there
- No awareness that the absence is permanent
- Awareness of changes to routines



What you might notice

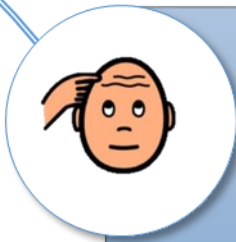
- Crying/screaming due to a lack of language to express their loss
- May develop eating/sleep problems or decreased responsiveness
- May keep looking or asking for a missing parent or carer
- May become clingy and afraid of strangers



What helps

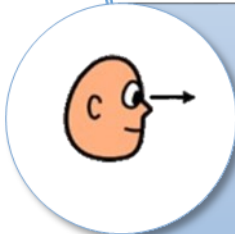
- Minimise disruptions to their care
- Provide extra comfort, e.g. holding more, playing calm music, talking in a soft voice
- Take care of the caregiver and make sure they are supported

2-4 years



Concept of death

- Naturally egocentric and may see themselves as cause of death e.g. they may feel it is because they have been "naughty" or wished the person would go away
- Think that death is reversible and not permanent e.g. believe they can make the person come back
- May worry about who will take care of them and of being abandoned
- May be affected by the sadness of significant others



What you might notice

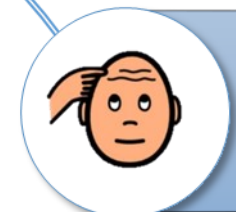
- Conflicting statements showing inability to understand the finality of death e.g. "I know mum has died but will she be at my party next week?"
- May ask a lot of questions repetitively
- May regress in their development, e.g. eating/sleeping, wetting the bed, physical symptoms becoming irritable or confused



What helps

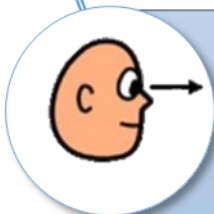
- Be patient and give factual information
- Short honest interactions
- Comfort and reassurance – nurture
- Consistent routine

4-6 years



Concept of death

- Death may be seen as a temporary state - somewhere people can go to and come back from
- May perceive the separation as a punishment
- May start to realise that death is irreversible



What you might notice

- Egocentric orientation – everything is from their perspective
- 'Magical thinking' – make up fantasies to fill any gaps in knowledge
- Can hold in mind a reasonably secure picture of their loved ones
- May not have the language to express their emotions but may repeat a memorised script
- Pretend play may feature death/dying – this is normal and helps the child integrate the reality of the death
- Feelings of guilt, rejection, anger or resentment



What helps

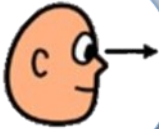
- Consistent caregiving in line with daily routines
- Avoid euphemisms and check understanding e.g. "cancer spreading", "passed away" & "gone to sleep"
- Allow the child to express grief through play and art
- Encourage memories
- Support children to name their feelings, e.g. numb, frustrated, sad
- Adults can join pretend play and offer guidance

6-10 years



Concept of death

- Around 6-8 years, still 'magical thinkers' – 'was it my fault?'
- By around 10 years may recognise that death is universal and irreversible



What you might notice

- May want to know more about death, e.g. why and how?
- May worry that you or others may die too
- May make them feel less safe and become more dependent
- May experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness and worry
- May find it difficult to express these feelings
- May show compassion for someone who is bereaved and may worry about effect on other people if they are sad and therefore try to hide their feelings



What helps

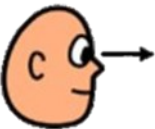
- Check what they know and what they want to know
- Be truthful and open
- Provide simple concrete information
- Maintain access to peers
- Allow the child to express emotions through creative activities e.g. drawing, music, drama and stories
- Encourage memories
- Give physical outlets

10-12 years



Concept of death

- Death is irreversible and happens to everyone



What you might notice

- May be full of thoughts on the meaning of life and death
- May be living life to the full to avoid thinking about the loss or bereavement
- Can feel like they are the only one to experience grief



What helps

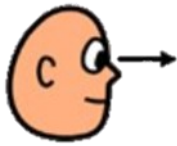
- Check what they know and what they want to know
- Check understanding of language
- Allow expressions of emotion, e.g. sadness/anger
- Be clear, honest and open
- Provide privacy
- Maintain access to peer/social support
- Consider support groups
- Consider impact of emerging independence/identity

Adolescents



Concept of death

- Understand death as a concept but just beginning to deal with it emotionally
- Do not have the experiences, coping skills or behaviours of an adult



What you might notice

- May protest loss by acting out/withdrawing
- May feel life is unfair and act angrily
- May test own mortality by taking risks e.g. using alcohol or drugs
- May express a wish to be with the person that has died. This is a common reaction that does not necessarily mean they are suicidal but does require clarification. Asking the question will not put the idea in their head.
- May act in a way that is 'expected' and therefore hide what they are really feeling
- Feeling of responsibility, possibly stepping into a new role within the family
- A wish to be normal
- Changes to eating patterns



What helps

- Experiences of varying emotions and increase in mood swings will require patience and consistency from adults close to them
- Young people will require regular reassurance that their feelings are okay
- Permission to ask questions and receive honest responses
- Follow their lead. Allow the right not to talk – it is important to recognise that although talking is the main way in which adults communicate when experiencing difficulties this may not be what the young person wants.
- Calm space / time out – provide opportunities to take 'time out' in a quiet or calm space for a specified amount of time during the day
- Not being singled out
- Peers can be a huge support to adolescents as young people become more independent
- Remembering the person who died
- Honesty in situations such as a terminal illness
- In time most adolescents are able to return to daily routines with predictable ups and downs. There are others who may require more significant support in the longer term.

This guidance is part of a 'Bereavement, Loss and Grief' collection that aims to provide parents, carers and school staff with information to help them understand and support any bereaved child or young person.

Parents and carers might also find the following helpful:

- ♦ 'Information for parents/carers: How to support your child or young person with bereavement, loss and grief'

School staff might also find the following helpful:

- ♦ 'Information for staff: How to support a child or young person with bereavement, loss and grief'
- ♦ 'Bereavement, loss and grief: Staff support and self-care'