

How children understand loss

0-6 MONTHS.

The security and consistency of their care is disrupted. The child may look for the lost person and protest when they do not appear. They are often affected by the emotional state of caregivers.

The baby may become irritable or develop erratic eating, sleeping and crying patterns.

6 MONTHS-2 YEARS.

The child is starting to understand that when things are out of sight they are still there and will return. They will look for the person and become anxious if they are not found.

Signs of separation anxiety, apathy, withdrawal and lack of interest in toys and food may be expected from the child of this age, unable to understand why the person does not come back.

2-5 YEARS.

Unable to grasp the permanence of death, the child may behave in a way that is designed to get the person back. This can include:

- Crying
- Clinging and
- Showing anger through destructive behavior and tantrums.

Strategies children sometimes use to minimise the pain are to:

- deny being upset and show the opposite
- imitate films or stories in which people have died
- become more clingy
- return to earlier behavior such as bed wetting
- displace pain and get very upset over apparently small things
- become obsessive about death, funerals etc
- have outbursts of aggression
- become withdrawn or isolated
- lack interest in things
- escalates attention seeking behaviour
- becomes less independent or pretend to be helpless
- develop physical symptoms such as headache or loss of appetite

PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP.

- use a nightlight if the child is afraid of the dark
- dress them in extra warm clothes or give them warm quilts to snuggle into
- tuck them in tightly at night
- give special treats
- adjust the amount of food offered according to their appetite
- give them comforting food, the things that remind them of earlier, happier times
- accept all the feelings they express and share some of yours
- do not tell your child not to worry or cheer up
- keep to routines
- talk about the person who has gone away
- give plenty of hugs, attention and your time
- keep boundaries, but show understanding of unwanted behavior
- let them know it was not their fault

They may repeatedly ask when the person is coming back and may find it impossible to believe that the person will not return.

A loss undermines the child's security and sense of reliability of the world. They will seek constant reassurance and explanations, although explanations can continue to confuse them.

Frequently children experience fears that they will soon disappear.

The child has less ability than adults to cope with severe emotional pain for any length of time. They may move from apparent unconcern to the depths of despair very rapidly.

HELP THE CHILD TO EXPRESS FEELINGS THROUGH ACTIVITIES SUCH AS:

- Role play
- Puppet work
- Messy or noisy play
- Physical activity
- Stories and pictures
- Memory boxes or books

Be honest. It is acceptable to say no one knows yet.

Children may ask the same question repeatedly. Keep repeating the answer. That gives them the security and helps them take in what has happened.

Between the ages of 2 and 5 children are easily confused about explanations of death. Keep answers as simple as possible.

Only explain for as long as the child can listen. If they walk away in the middle of an explanation they have taken in all they can at that time.

For young children you may need to give one piece of information at a time.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS.

Q Why can't (name) get up anymore?

A (name) died because he was ill. That means his body is no use to him anymore. He cannot feel anything now, so he won't hurt anymore. He cannot think either, so he will never be scared or sad anymore.

Q Why has (name) not had his tea?

A (name) does not need to eat now because he is dead and his body is of no use to him now. He does not need to have cuddles or eat or play. Just like the leaves fall off the trees and die.

Q Why doesn't (name) wake up?

A (name) isn't sleeping. Sleep and death are different. When we sleep we rest our bodies so that we have lots of energy for the next day. When someone dies his or her body stops working, so they don't wake up or fall asleep. (name) body has finished working.

Q What will happen to (name) now?

A We will have his body put into a box called a coffin. Then we will choose whether we put it into the ground in a special garden called a cemetery or have his body changed into ashes that we could bury in the ground, keep in a pot called an urn or scatter somewhere special.

Q What happens to dead people?

A Many people think that part of the person who makes them who they are; the person who loves you, is not the same as his body. That part of a person is called a spirit. When the body dies the spirit lives on and even though we can't see it, it never wears out. Sometimes we call these memories.

Q What is heaven like?

A We cannot tell what heaven looks like. We don't know where it is . Many people think it is somewhere full of love where our spirits go when they leave our bodies.

Q Why did (name) die?

A (name) died because (cause) it did not happen because of anything that you said or did. he loved you and would have stayed here with you if he could have done. There is nothing anyone can do now to make him come alive again. We will remember him just as he was.

Q What is funeral?

A A funeral is a special meeting when anyone who knew (name) can go and remember him. Sometimes people cry at funerals and say prayers and sing special songs. It is when we either bury the coffin or turn it into ashes.

Q Am I going to die?

A We will all die one day. You are young and strong and healthy, so you should live for a long, long time. Usually people die when they are very old and their bodies are worn out or very unwell.

Q Will I ever feel better?

A We all feel sad that (name) has died. That is ok. When we feel sad we can cry together or give each other a cuddle. You will feel better one day.

Q Is it ok to be happy and play?

A (name) would have wanted you to remember the happy things about him and go on playing and talking to your friends.

When a child experiences the loss of a special person, it is important to speak about what it felt like to be loved by and to love that person, as well as the pain of the loss. This may help the child understand why they are hurting so much.

The following are the sort of statements you might use when your child wants to talk. make sure you can put them into language the child can understand.

“You feel that (name) loved you very much.”

“(name) seemed to understand all about you.”

“(name) loved you just as you are and whatever you did.”

RESPONDING TO CHILDREN'S FEELINGS ABOUT DEATH.

Help the child to acknowledge their feelings and help them talk about them. It is important to let them know that no feelings are wrong, or cannot be talked about.

Help them acknowledge that:

- When someone you love is not there anymore, it hurts.
- It is fine to feel happy sometimes and sad at other times.
- Sometimes things may seem cold, boring and dull.
- You might feel as if you want to hide away forever.
- It is fine to cry.
- It helps to talk.
- You can always remember.
- Things might change.
- it's ok to feel angry.
- Feeling sad is hard on your own. It helps to find someone to be sad with you.

It is normal to see changed behaviour for a short time after a loss. Usually symptoms of grieving disappear after a year. However, as children's understanding of death reaches a more mature level, they often revisit previous losses and grieve again.

The following behaviour may indicate that a child can't deal with their feelings or is overwhelmed by them. They might suggest the need to refer on:

- Numbness that goes on. perhaps the child does not cry. This is only a concern if the child really loved the person who had died.
- Continued denial. "I didn't really need Daddy anyway."
- Intense and persistent anger.
- Fear of losing other people or things that result in over the top anxiety. The child may repeatedly have to check that things are still there.
- Unwillingness or inability to form relationships, particularly new ones, focusing on the inner world.
- Despair because the child sees him or herself unlovable. "he's gone, I'm no good."