

**BEREAVEMENT IN CHILDREN**  
excerpts from  
**Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)  
Adelaide: East Street Publications**  
– and –  
**Porter, L. (2008). *Young children's behaviour* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn)  
Sydney: Elsevier.**

Even without experiencing the death of a family member or close friend, children aged between four and six years will begin asking questions about death and why everyone has to die. Sometimes, they are not asking for facts but want you to recognise that they are afraid of losing you and of dying themselves. In answer, you cannot guarantee that you are not going to die, but you can reassure them that you are not old or ill and that you take care of yourself by wearing a seatbelt, having a smoke detector at home, driving safely...and so on.

When your family has lost a member or friend, this can hasten children's exposure to issues of loss and death. An understanding of the grieving process can help you to deal with everyone's reactions. This awareness will not relieve your loneliness and sense of loss, but it can avoid your feeling panicked about your own turbulent emotions.

### **The grieving process**

We expect someone with a physical injury to take some time to get well again but we sometimes forget that emotional pain needs a recovery period too. In the grieving process, adults go through many emotions over many months. This begins with *shock* and numbness and can be followed by *depression* and loneliness, *panic*, *anger* with ourselves or the person we have lost, *guilt* and finally a gradual *hope* that we can find a new way to be happy – even if we do not yet know exactly how.

Along the way we might get both physical symptoms of our distress and unsettling emotional outbursts. Finally, once we have grown through these normal reactions to grief, we can remember the person we have lost without the searing pain that memory used to bring. We might be left with a new insecurity about the possibility of losing someone again but, at the same time, we also know that we can survive to love again.

### **Expect children to react**

Children follow a similar pattern, with some added dimensions depending on their age. Under two-year-olds might feel confused at the deceased person's sudden absence or at their parents' distraction with their own grief. They might wander off as if searching for the person who is lost. Preschoolers will not realise that death is permanent so can seem to be callously ignoring their bereavement but then later become bewildered as they gradually realise that the deceased person is not coming back. Children in the five- to eight-year age group are magical thinkers and sometimes believe that they have somehow caused the person's death (perhaps having previously said or thought in anger, 'I wish you were dead'). As a result,

children of this age often try to be especially good to bring the person back to life. Children over nine years of age will experience adult-like reactions (as just described) and will be interested in the spiritual aspects of death. Finally, adolescents or emotionally advanced younger children are likely to want to talk with peers about their loss, but they still need their parents to be available to them as well. These young people commonly might worry that someone else in the family could die or leave, particularly if their parents' relationship is strained at the time.

### **Explain death to children**

Young children are not aware that death is irreversible and that dead people no longer feel, think or sense. It can be crucial to explain these facts to them as otherwise they can become distressed at the burial or cremation.

The best time to discuss death is during natural conversations with children, rather than when they are already bereaved. However, if you have not broached the subject before the time of a death, detail the physical facts only as the children will be too upset to take in any new spiritual information. They will need information and honest answers to their questions about the death, its circumstances and cause. Otherwise they will fill in missing details with their imagination, which can be even more frightening than reality. Keep in mind that children cannot cope with a lot of facts at once but instead need to be 'drip fed' small amounts of information often.

Children often ask where the deceased person goes. What you tell them will, of course, depend on your religious beliefs. Whatever your response, you can add that the spirit of the deceased person or the love that they felt for that person lives on in their heart and memories. This will always be there. It is not unusual for children to repeat the same question in an effort to receive a different answer (Willis 2002). This may signal that, naturally, they do not like the facts or that they are unclear because we have cloaked our answers in euphemisms (such as that the deceased has 'gone to sleep'), which are frightening or confusing them.

### **Explain that the deceased person did not choose to leave them**

Tell children that the person whom they loved died because his or her body grew very old or very very sick from an illness or an accident, so sick that nothing could be done to make him or her better. In the case of the death through illness of a baby or child, you might say that the baby's body hadn't been made properly and so she couldn't live in that body any more. It is important to emphasise that the dead person did not *want* to leave them. (See the section below about suicide, however.)

### **Involve children in the rituals surrounding death**

At the time of the death and funeral service, your children will need you even though you are upset. It is generally more frightening for them to be away from you than to attend the funeral. If kept away they could assume that they are to blame for the person's death and are being punished for it.

If a death has already occurred in your family and your children did not attend any memorial or funeral service, together you can plant a tree to commemorate the person they have loved. They can help to water, feed and tend the tree. If you move house, planting another tree of the same type can be a way to make this new house into your home and to continue the remembrance.

## **Allow the children to play out their feelings**

Emotionally supportive caregiving can shield children from extraneous stressors, freeing them to handle their bereavement (Wolchik et al. 2006). Even though you might feel distressed yourself, it will be important to listen to children's feelings and to reassure them that they and their family will get through their sadness. Some therapeutic play activities include (Wakenshaw 2002):

- trace children's body outline on a large sheet of paper and have them choose colours for areas where they feel various emotions;
- make up some large dice with pictures of their family members or pets on each face (including the one who has died), and when they roll the dice, invite them to tell you how they feel about that family member;
- use play telephones or puppet play to talk with the children about their experience of loss;
- use the sandpit with figurines and ask the children to create something they have been thinking about, then talk with them about their creation. Dollhouses and pictures of their family can generate similar discussions.

## **The death of a parent**

The loss of a parent during early childhood is a developmental crisis. It forces children to confront the concept of death (perhaps before they would have otherwise) at the same time as losing someone who made their world safe. Over time, children aged under five will lose their personal memories of their parent, and thus feel that something of who they are themselves is being lost. To replace their lost memories, you can give them photos and personal items of their parent, keep alive stories of their him or her and maintain contact between the children and relatives on their deceased parent's side of the family.

If their parent's death was a suicide, it will be very important to tell children that their parent wasn't thinking straight at the time of the suicide. The parent became absorbed in ending whatever emotional pain he or she was experiencing, and wasn't able to think how much sadness his or her suicide would cause. Some parents even feel so worthless that they think they are actually helping their child by dying. Remind your child that there was nothing anyone could have done to prevent this. Explain that no one knew that their parent was so full of despair. If someone could have done something, they would have.

If you lost a parent as a child, you might find yourself revisiting your desolation when your child reaches the age you were at the time your parent died or when you reach the age of your parent at death. Your children will need to be protected from this despair, however. It is not an issue for children. Instead, seek comfort and support from your adult partner or friends or if the abandonment and grief seem insurmountable, professional counselling can be useful.

## **Sharing and bereaved children**

Children who have suffered a profound emotional deprivation such as the loss of a parent through a death or separation, tend to be less able to share and often hoard items that they do not even require. It's as if they have learned early to grasp anything that is available, because they never know when they will be deprived of it.

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It can help to let them have some personal items that they do not need to share with siblings, and to allow them to take some precious items to child care, preschool or school without having to share these.

### **Further reading**

- Fitzgerald, H. (1992). *The grieving child: A parent's guide*. New York: Fireside.
- McKissock, D. (1998). *The grief of our children*. Sydney: ABC.
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- Wakenshaw, M. (2002). *Caring for your grieving child*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Wells, R. (1998). *Helping children cope with grief: Facing a death in the family*. London: Sheldon.
- Westberg, G.E. (1992). *Good grief*. (rev. ed.) Melbourne: Fortress.