



children grieve
too...

Bereaved Children's Awareness

www.childhoodbereavement.ie

A large number of children experience bereavement in childhood; for example, two in every one hundred 9 year olds in Ireland have lost a parent. However, the loss of a parent is only one example of children's loss that encompasses the death of any important person in their lives, be that a sibling, friend, grandparent, uncle or aunt or another person who is significant to them.

CHILDREN'S GRIEF

- Unlike adults children dip in and out of grief. It can be intermittent and intense but also can pass quickly, distracted by friends and activities.
- Children tend to protect parents from their pain and upset. This often leaves their grief unrecognised.
- Grief in childhood and teens makes the young person feel different from their peers.
- Children try to control their grief holding it in and pretending nothing has happened. This can be isolating.
- Each child in a family grieves differently due to their personality, age, gender and the relationship they had with the person who has died.
- Death can be frightening for children especially without the information to help understand what is happening.
- Children's grief is not a once off occurrence but affects them at milestone times in life e.g. going into a new school, graduating, getting married etc.

WHAT HELPS?

- Acknowledge their loss -otherwise a child can feel excluded.
- Age appropriate information to help them understand – an adolescent's experience is very different from a five year olds.
- Taking part in the funerals/goodbye rituals and even making something (e.g., a picture) or having a part to play gives a sense of control – but only if they wish to do so.
- Children need time to express feelings - even anger, which can be an expression of the deep hurt and unfairness they are feeling.
- They need time to remember the person who has died and share the stories of their relationship with them.
- They need to know that they are not to blame for a death and that their thoughts or things they say do not cause death to occur.
- Meeting other bereaved children can help them understand that they are not alone in what has happened.

WHEN TO BE CONCERNED

- When a child shows persistent anxiety about the loss and life in general.
- When a child is persistently aggressive.
- When a child socially withdraws from friends and activities.
- When a child carries self- blame and guilt about the death.
- Self- destructive behaviour and risk taking.
- Self- harming.
- Suicidal behaviour.

The above behaviours indicate more complicated grieving and require more specialised intervention.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

0-2 Years After a death in the family it is common for a baby to become withdrawn or display outbursts of loud crying and angry tears. Although infants do not understand death, they know when things have changed and may react to a person's absence. This may show in clinginess and distress. Maintaining the child's routine and making them feel secure are the most important ways to support children of this age.

2-5 Years Children still do not fully understand death at this age. They don't realise that death is permanent and is something that happens to everyone at some time. They need to know the person who died cannot return and that they are not simply asleep. They worry that something they said or did may have caused the death and need reassurance to know that it is not their fault. Children should be encouraged to ask questions which should be answered openly and simply. Children often ask the same questions over and over again. Answering these questions patiently will help them and give them reassurance.

5-8 Years Children gradually learn that death is final and that all people will die at some time. This may make them worry that other people close to them will also die. It can help children to talk about these fears. We can't promise children that no-one will ever die in the family but we can help them to feel safe by telling them that they will always be looked after. It can help children if they are encouraged to talk about and express their feelings, no matter what the feelings are. More curious children in this age group often ask direct questions about what has happened to the body as they are trying to understand. They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking', filling the gaps when information has not been given to them.

8-12 Years They understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Grief can express itself through physical aches and pains and challenging behaviour. It is important not to place unnecessary responsibility on children of this age especially eldest children who may feel responsible for younger siblings, or boys who lose their father and take on the role of 'man of the house'. Support the child by reassuring them about changes in lifestyle (such as household income and the family home).

As the child moves into adolescence they face a time of great change. As teenagers try to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood, they struggle with issues of identity and independence. Losing someone at this time can make life very difficult. There is a marked difference in the grieving styles of Early (12-14 years) and Late (15-18 years). For more detailed information about adolescent loss see our website

THE IRISH CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT NETWORK (ICBN)

The network supports families and professionals who support bereaved children in Ireland;

- We provide information on children's grief and how it may be supported.
- We advocate on behalf of bereaved children to Government and other agencies.
- We have developed a Pyramid of Bereavement Care for Children in Ireland exploring needs and competencies.
- We have developed Standards for supporting bereaved Children & Young People.
- We have also created resources to support teachers in their classroom while teaching bereaved children.
- We organise and host national conferences, regional meetings and workshops throughout Ireland to bring professionals together.



VISIT OUR WEBSITE
www.childhoodbereavement.ie



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**The Irish Childhood
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