Families

Grief is confusing. And while it's completely natural for parents to worry about their children and want to protect them, the best thing is to give them honest, age-appropriate information about a death. Someone who knows the child really well should break the news. Children understand the world through other people; family primarily, but also carers, teachers, extended family, and friends. Support and information from all these people is vital. See www. childhoodbereavement.ie

Schools

When a bereaved child returns to school, it is important that the school climate is supportive and understanding of their needs. Bereavement can impact hugely on the emotional and social well-being of the child, and on their ability to concentrate and conduct their studies. Most grieving pupils do not need a bereavement expert, just the support of people who care. Teachers can make a real difference to bereaved pupils by acknowledging their loss and by offering opportunities for them to talk about their experiences if they want to, and by listening and responding to a pupil's spoken and unspoken messages.

How can I help?

- Talk – tell them the truth, and have open, honest conversations using clear language they can understand
- Acknowledge their feelings – and encourage them to ask questions to help understand and cope with emotions
- Reassure them and be prepared to repeat the information until they can fully get their head around things
- Explain things in a way that they understand no matter how young

The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) is a hub for those working with bereaved children and young people throughout Ireland.

- Support professionals in delivering high quality, appropriate and accessible bereavement services for children and young people who are bereaved
- Signpost families and carers to a directory of bereavement services available throughout Ireland
- Inform the general public about issues related to childhood loss
- Advocate for bereaved children, young people and their families

Contact Information:

Email: icbn@hospicefoundation.ie
Telephone: 01 679 3188

Website:
www.childhoodbereavement.ie

Address:
Irish Childhood Bereavement Network
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The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network

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Understanding Children's Grief

www.childhoodbereavement.ie

Introduction

Grief is confusing, hard, lonely & overwhelming for adults and children. Unfortunately, we cannot fix or reverse what has happened, but we can do our best to help children through the reality of this difficult time in an honest and open manner.

It is helpful to understand the way children process grief, and try to support them so that they don't feel that they should be 'over it' within a certain period of time – and more importantly so they don't think something is wrong with them if they feel the loss coming up again and again. Adults can help children understand that this is a normal process of grief. We can't promise things will get back to normal, but we can help them learn to live with their 'new normal' without the loved one.

Age Groups

0 - 2 Years

- Very young children do not understand death but feel the absence of the familiar person.
- They can sense that something has changed, keeping routine as normal as much as possible.
- They may show clinginess and distress, and are also likely to withdraw or have outbursts of loud crying and angry tears.

2- 4 Years

- The child does not understand the finality of death and may search for the person.
- They may show sign of regression and irritability, sometimes with intensity.
- As adults, we need to respond with care and comfort, to help them feel safe. In time, they will establish another relationship.

4 - 7 Years

- At this age, they are learning language, gaining autonomy and exploring the world.
- They ask very concrete and challenging questions, as they are not clear about the meaning or finality of death.
- They can regress and have nightmares or play violent games.
- They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking'.
- They may not have words to express their emotions, but we can learn a lot about their thoughts and needs when we observe their play.

7 - 11 Years

- By this age, they usually understand the meaning of death, so their questions can be more direct and challenging.
- They may worry that other people close to them will die as well.
- Sleep and eating may be disturbed; they may withdraw from friends/normal activities.
- They need their questions answered, and they need support in accepting their changing feelings.

Visit our website for further information and resources

Adolescents

Adolescence is a time of paradoxes. At this age, it is normal to rebel against control, but also want direction and structure, often pushing the limits, yet can see limits as a sign of caring. Grief reactions depend on a number of factors, including their age, relationship with the person, their personality and previous experiences with death. Grief takes a tremendous amount of energy and can leave students struggling with focus, memory and completing tasks.

Sometimes young people don't show any visible reaction at all, but you may see some of the following:

- May mask fears with rebellion
- Be moody, negative and anti-social
- Use drugs or drink to numb the pain
- Try to find meaning in their powerlessness
- Struggle to prepare for a future that is uncertain
- Drop out of activities
- Don't always want to talk

When to be concerned:

- When a child shows persistent anxiety about the loss and it impacts on their day-to-day functioning
- When a child is persistently aggressive
- When a child socially withdraws from friends and activities for a continued length of time
- When a child carries self-blame and guilt about the death
- Self-harming and or suicidal behaviour