

## WHAT CAN I SAY TO A CHILD?

Adults often feel uncertain about how best to help children when someone they love has died.



We want to protect them from the pain, we are unsure of what to say and how they will react!

In fact, even quite young children can grieve. They need to be included in saying “goodbye” in their own personal way to the person they love.

*If children are kept away they can often feel rejected and guilty that somehow they are to blame for what has occurred.*

Like adults each child is individual in the way they will react to grief. They need our love and acceptance.

This can be difficult for adults who are dealing with their own grief emotions at the same time.

## CHILDREN’S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH AT DIFFERENT AGES

### Under 2 years old

They sense something is wrong and need to remain with the family if possible. Maintaining their routine and plenty of cuddles helps them to feel secure.



### Ages 3 - 4 years

Pre-schoolers see death as a temporary separation, even if they have seen the deceased person and attended the funeral. This is normal. Everything may need to be explained again and again, by someone they trust. Words like ‘gone to heaven’, ‘passed away’ should be avoided as they cause confusion and lack of finality.

### Ages 5 - 8 years

Often this is called the ‘magical thinking age’. Children can believe that ‘wishing’ makes something come true. The child can feel immense guilt for the death and become very quiet, believing that “if I am very good ..... will come back”.

### Ages 9 - 10 years

This age group is interested in what happens after death. They may have some idea of a soul and want to get all the answers e.g. “*What happens after the burial .....?*” They express their sorrow as adults.... apathy, crying, hostility or anger.

### Ages 11 and upward

They have the capacity to think as an adult and need to be treated as equals in the decision making process of the family.

## HELPING CHILDREN (UNDER 10 YEARS)



Tell the children about the death immediately, openly and honestly, in a simple straight-forward way. Using the word ‘died’ is important.



Encourage children to be part of the family discussions about the funeral. They may like to draw a picture, write a letter, release a balloon or place a toy with the person who died.



Explain about the ‘viewing’ and the funeral. Your funeral director may also help at this time. Ask children if they wish to attend .... respect their decision. Some children in a family may wish to attend, others not. Keeping children away or forcing them to go is not helpful.



Stay close to children, hug them, let them see you cry and explain that it’s okay to feel sad and confused, boys may especially need this reassurance.



Children will often ask the same questions over and over. If parents are grieving deeply it may be helpful for another trusted adult to be available. It’s okay to say “I don’t know”.



Children may be fearful that their parent/s may now die and may become very clingy. This is normal.



Children may act out their feelings rather than talking... ‘tummy aches, monsters in their room, bedwetting, aggressive behaviour’ are all part of their grief. Encourage them to draw — drawing can be a useful way of relieving their fears.

There are many excellent books which parents can share with children.

Creating a ‘Memory Box or Book’ can be helpful.



## HELPING ADOLESCENTS

As well as the items mentioned on the previous pages, adolescents are also dealing with major changes in their bodies, emotions and relationships.....

### *They need.....*

- ★ Freedom to express their feelings differently from others
  - ★ No belittling
- ★ "Permission" to be sorry
- ★ Acceptance of story, mixtures of fantasy (denial) and reality until they are ready to modify
- ★ Active involvement in problem solving

### **Forgiveness**

### **Respect**

### **Security**

- ★ Assurance of confidentiality



- ★ Encouragement to be themselves
- ★ Time out

## COMMON ISSUES AND REACTIONS

Childhood bereavement does not necessarily mean a child's development will be affected.

Rather there may be a lasting effect if they are excluded from the grieving family.

Small babies are vulnerable to emotional deprivation, because a mother's preoccupation may be seen as rejection by a small child. They become demanding and difficult. Older children try to understand the parent grief, but can feel resentful.

Lack of adequate explanations to children causes anxiety and fear.

Parental grief can result in a child feeling neglected.

Removing children from home can cause feelings of anger, guilt and rejection.

Matter of fact acceptance of the death is normal e.g. "At least I can go out and play again".

Social withdrawal, daydreaming and lack of concentration are all normal.



*Grief is an individual response ...as a child's intellect changes, it is normal for questions to surface months and years after the death.*

Books for all ages are available at COPE-Relationships Australia, 49A Orsmond St, Hindmarsh

This brochure covers some of the things we need to consider when helping grieving children. For more information please look at our website

[www.SandE.com.au](http://www.SandE.com.au)

or call our

**Bereavement Care Services at  
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8255 5607**

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# Helping Children After a Death



*We Help People  
Through Difficult Times*

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