

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH A LOSS

When children are affected by any difficult loss, whatever the cause, what they need most is the loving care, patience, kindness, and ongoing support of family, friends, and caring others. When a child is helped to feel safe, reassured, and comforted, they can cope better with things – and with their grief. Grief is a normal process that helps all ages slowly adjust after a difficult, unwanted loss. Whatever their age or stage, they'll react and grieve their loss in their own individual way.

Keeping up their routines as much as possible (or starting a new routine if that's needed) can particularly help children to feel more secure when things have changed a lot. Predictability is comforting and reassuring. A routine feels familiar and 'normal' in stressful times. It can include things like having regular meals or snacks, keeping up a regular time for getting up, bath or shower, teeth, and sleep. Also making time each day for going to their childcare, school, or after-school jobs, doing usual activities, finishing their chores, having play or down time, or spending time with you, friends, and other family. A routine gives them, and their families, clear expectations, and helpful boundaries.

Here are some insights into children's grief reactions at different ages and some practical ways to give support.

Infants and Toddlers

They don't understand what's happening but can sense changes, which can make them fretful. They can sense others' distress and tension too. They can't talk to express themselves so need others for reassurance and comfort. They may cry or scream more, be irritable, easily startled, or extra clingy. They might become less active and responsive, and may regress in their development, but just temporarily. Changes in feeding and sleeping patterns, bowel and bladder patterns, and picking up a bug or virus more easily, are common.



The Grief Centre

Ways to give them support...

Look after their needs well. This can sometimes take extra patience if you are also experiencing the loss.

Go slowly with them and be kind. Talk in a gentle, calm voice and keep things as routine and settled around them as possible.

Minimise separations from them and spend more time cuddling and holding them. Special comfort items, like a blanket or cuddly toy, may help. Grief takes the time it needs to take for them.

Preschoolers

3-5 year olds can only understand simple things about what's happened but can sense a change and loss. They can also sense when those around them are distressed and tense, which can upset them. They may look unaffected but be reacting inside, and their reactions usually come in short bursts – sometimes unexpectedly. They can only express their needs with limited language, so they instinctively look to parents and carers for reassurance and comfort. Older ones might ask many questions. They may be anxious, fretful, confused, and clingier. Some may cry or scream more, be irritable, or have more tantrums. Some might become withdrawn and quieter than usual, while others may become more active and restless.

Often young ones regress in their development, but just temporarily. There can be changes in their eating and sleeping, toileting, stomach aches, possible weight loss, and they may pick up bugs and viruses more easily, and have small accidents.



Ways to give them support...

Look after their needs well. Help them to eat healthy food, get enough water, and have enough rest and sleep. Keep to regular routines if you can.

Go slowly with them and be kind. Talk in a gentle, calm voice and keep things as settled around them as possible. Answer their questions simply.

Minimise separations from them and spend more time cuddling and holding them. Special comfort items, like a blanket or cuddly toy, may be helpful for them. Grief will take the time it needs to take for them as they adjust. Each pre-schooler is different.



Primary Age

Children may be deeply affected by loss but look unaffected. Their reactions usually come in bursts, then things seem to get back to normal. It's often very up and down for them. They usually sense when things 'feel wrong' or others are tense and upset. They'll probably understand some facts about the loss but might still get confused or misunderstand. They often find that expressing themselves, explaining what they need, and coping with big feelings difficult. Some may ask direct, even blunt questions. Many find concentrating and learning much harder for a while.

Common emotional reactions include: shock, disbelief, distress, confusion, sadness, anxiety and worry, clinginess, irritability, anger, guilt, blaming, rejection or abandonment, embarrassment, shame, a low or changeable mood, feeling overwhelmed. Some may blame themselves for what happened.

Common physical reactions include: difficulty sleeping or sleeping more, appetite changes, increased physical complaints like tummy aches, nausea, or headaches. Existing conditions may get worse. They may pick up bugs and viruses more easily, and have small accidents.

Common behavioural reactions include: preoccupied by the loss, asking more questions, searching for reasons, imagining the loss can be reversed, unable to focus, forgetful, temporarily reverting to younger behaviour, bedwetting, soiling, nightmares, separation anxiety, increased tantrums, disruptive behaviour, social withdrawal, less interest in school and usual activities.

Ways to give them support...



Reassure them the loss isn't their fault. Explain it's okay to talk about things with people they trust. Perhaps name them together. Let them know their reactions are normal, and they won't always hurt this much. Explain that even if difficult memories come along like a big wave, they can find some good ways to manage them. Let them know crying – or not crying – is okay.

Talk gently, calmly, and kindly. Keep things as settled as possible. Use clear, simple words to explain things, giving them bite-sized pieces of information. Check they understand. Answer their questions. Repeat things if they're confused. Reassure them who's looking after them. Remind them often they're loved and safe, and by who. Limit separations, show affection, and hug and hold them more if they like that. Encourage them to talk – then listen well. Teach them words to describe their feelings.



Older Primary (11-13 yrs)

Older children are commonly affected by the same things listed above, but they will often understand more about the loss and its consequences. They may ask big life questions they haven't asked before. They may be more able to express themselves, but might still struggle to manage their strong feelings. Mood swings may happen more. Social embarrassment about their loss might start to affect them because their peer group matters more. Some might not react openly but be very distressed inside. This can be masked by behaviour such as acting out, clowning around more, being disruptive, withdrawing more from others, being extremely 'good', or taking on some adult responsibilities to try to 'fix things'. A few may find unhelpful behaviours to cope, such as using alcohol, drugs, or other risk taking.



Ways to give them support...

Older children need all the kinds of support suggested above, but here are a few extra ways you can show your support. They are likely to appreciate honest, reliable updates so take time to give them clear information. Involve them in making choices, if possible, and include them in family activities. If they talk, listen really well. Let them know you've heard them. Let them be the age and stage they are – don't expect more from them than that. They are likely to need more time with their peers now, so help this happen if possible. Peers can give them good support and some helpful distraction. Talk together about using social media wisely at this vulnerable time, as others may misuse it and make harmful comments.

Seek Some Extra Help If...

You notice any concerning behaviour, emotional changes, or health issues that are ongoing or increasing, or sudden and out of character. Talk with your doctor, school, or other helping professional, such as a counsellor. Help now can help them get through this time and build resilience for the future.

