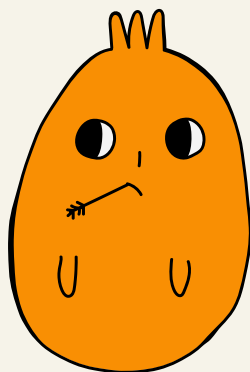


Bereavement

Supporting bereaved children in the early years



Young children & grief



Predicting how loss will affect young children is challenging due to their individual needs, which are influenced by their developmental stage and the support they receive from adults. Bereaved children's feelings are not dissimilar to adults, but they might not have the ability to understand their emotions, the language to express them, or the skills to manage them.

Common reactions to bereavement among young children include separation anxiety, dependency, night-time fears, regressive behaviour, irritability, and impatience (Christ & Christ, 2006). Young children might also complain of physical discomfort, such as headaches or stomach aches, and exhibit signs of separation distress or detachment. Bereavement can feel like abandonment or punishment to them. They may see death as reversible and search for the deceased person.

Without sufficient information, children experience loss without understanding its permanence or that they are not to blame. This lack of understanding can result in fear, confusion, anger, or insecurity on top of their grief. Therefore, it is crucial to help children make sense of death.

Learning about death

We can help young children learn about death by explaining that it is a natural part of life. All living things eventually die, accidents occur, and illness and ageing are normal aspects of life.



When explaining the concept of death to a young child, it is important to focus on concrete aspects like the heart stopping, the body no longer working, and not needing food or warmth. Young children must know that once a person has died, they cannot come back to life.

Understanding the story of what happened



Studies indicate that children who receive information about death cope better than those who are shielded from such discussions (Martinčková et al., 2020).

It is essential to be honest with children about death and provide reassurance that they are not to blame for the loss.



What does the child know about this death?

Consider the information the child has received about the death. When there are gaps, young children tend to fill them in themselves. They rely on their existing knowledge and experiences to try and make sense of things. Therefore, it is crucial to prompt children, when they are cognitively ready, to think about the following questions:

- Who died?
- Why did they die?
- When did they die?
- Where did they die?
- What happened next? Funeral? Buried?



The goal is to ensure the child understands all aspects and can form a complete understanding. Having this knowledge helps to reduce anxiety in young children by avoiding uncertainty. Withholding information can complicate their understanding of death and may lead to later distress. It may erode trust in adults and create feelings of dishonesty. Young children need enough information in line with their developmental stage to answer their questions. When explaining, use words they will understand.

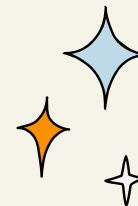
Language

Be mindful of the language you use. It is best to use honest, clear, and unambiguous language. Clearly explain that the person has died and what this means in terms the child can grasp. Avoid using phrases like "lost" or "gone to sleep," as they can cause fear and confusion. Religious explanations may be helpful if they align with the family's faith. Adapt your communication style to suit the child's level of development. Never assume that the child either understands or does not understand. To ensure understanding, ask the child to translate the information you have given them back to you.

Grieving in puddles

Young children may fluctuate between moments of sadness and moments of playfulness. This is a normal part of grieving and does not mean they are not experiencing it. Recognise this range of feelings and try to offer support.

Further support:



Adjusting to a new life



Maintain familiar routines as much as possible to provide a stable foundation for the young child to navigate other changes resulting from their loss. Continuing attendance at the nursery offers a sense of security and continuity. Nursery can also offer respite from any tension or emotionally charged atmosphere at home. Early years staff can provide an outlet for the child to discuss their grief. Research also indicates that engaging in play enables children to express, comprehend, and process emotions, aiding in coping with loss. Above all, practice patience.

Keeping memories alive



Normalise talking about the person who has died to create a comfortable space for the young person to talk about their loss. It is also a chance to help the child recognise that the love they felt for the person lives on. Share stories about the person and seize opportunities to mention them, like noting, "That was mummy's favourite colour, too." Consider creating a memory box to store meaningful items relating to the deceased, providing the child with a way to revisit memories whenever they wish to remember their special person.