

# Tips for practitioners supporting children experiencing Change and Loss

Many children are affected by significant change and loss.  
This leaflet contains information intended to support  
school staff when dealing with grieving children.



North Ayrshire Council  
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir a Tuath

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## Developmental Stages

### Age | Concept of death

0-2 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May not understand death or appreciate significance of the loss</li><li>• Will sense changes in home</li></ul>
2-4 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• May see death as abandonment /punishment</li><li>• May see death as reversible or not permanent</li><li>• May connect unrelated events to death</li></ul>
4-7 yrs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Death is reversible</li><li>• May feel responsible for the death</li><li>• May see death as contagious</li><li>• 'Magical thinking' – may believe their actions can make the dead person come alive again</li><li>• Can understand symbolic acts like laying flowers</li></ul>
7yrs - adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Starting to understand finality of death</li><li>• May see death as punishment</li><li>• Fear of bodily harm for themselves and others</li></ul>

Grief response	Signs of distress	Adult role
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irritability</li> <li>• Responds/reacts to emotions of adults</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regression</li> <li>• Change in sleeping or eating patterns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-establishment of routine</li> <li>• Comforting</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very present oriented, aware of change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regression</li> <li>• Change in sleeping or eating patterns</li> <li>• Bedwetting insecurity</li> <li>• Separation anxiety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-establishment of routine</li> <li>• Comforting</li> <li>• Drawing, playing</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repetitive questioning</li> <li>• Irrational feelings of guilt</li> <li>• May re-enact death/funeral during play</li> <li>• Asks about loved one's return</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regression – immature behaviour</li> <li>• Change in sleeping or eating patterns</li> <li>• Nightmares</li> <li>• Violent play</li> <li>• Problems in school – deterioration in performance, tiredness, concentration difficulties, irritable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge grief and treat as normal</li> <li>• Allow/encourage expression of feelings</li> <li>• Answer questions openly, at the time when asked</li> <li>• Demonstrate care and concern</li> <li>• Symbolic play</li> <li>• Art and drawing</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions about specific details</li> <li>• Concerns about normality in the grieving process</li> <li>• Some understanding of mourning</li> <li>• Fears loss of other loved ones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regression</li> <li>• Change in sleeping or eating patterns</li> <li>• Suicidal thoughts</li> <li>• Concern with bodily harm</li> <li>• Problems in school – deterioration in performance, tiredness, concentration difficulties, irritable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledge grief and treat as normal</li> <li>• Allow/encourage expression of feelings</li> <li>• Answer questions openly, at the time</li> <li>• Demonstrate care and concern</li> <li>• Allow some alone time, but be available</li> <li>• Symbolic play</li> </ul>

## Grief responses

Bonnano's (2010) multi-cultural research into grief and trauma indicates that the ability to rebound is the norm. Resilience is the most common pattern post loss and delayed reaction is rare.

## Potential Behaviours

Resilience - child may maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning and emerge from grief process with increased maturity and resilience

May be a temporary period for at least several months, where child exhibits signs of low mood or stress. In a minority of cases prolonged suffering can continue for several years or longer. Delayed trauma is manifested when child appears to have adjusted normally but distress and symptoms occur months later.

## Potential feeling:

- **Low energy**
- **Feeling physically unwell**
- **Fear of death from similar causes (if bereaved)**
- **Fear of punishment for anger**
- **Self blame for loss**
- **Suicidal ideation**

## Potential behaviours:

- **Poor concentration**
- **Less engagement with school work**
- **Refusal to complete work**
- **Refusal to go to school**
- **Less social interaction**
- **Regression**
- **Temper tantrums**
- **Self harm**

## Difficult Questions

**It is essential to explain clearly to the child that the dead person is not cold, or in pain and does not need food any more.**

**Young children are often curious about what happens to the body and it is quite acceptable to give information on the different procedures for burial or cremation.**

**Give responses which take account of the poignancy of separation through death but remain honest about what they can and cannot accept about the idea of being reunited, on some level, with the dead person.**

### 1 What's it like to be dead?

No-one knows for sure but we know it does not hurt, we don't feel cold or hungry.

### 2 Are they asleep?

Death is not sleep; the body has stopped working and cannot start up again.

### 3 Why didn't the hospital/doctor make them better?

Usually people get a little bit ill and then they get better, like a skinned knee when the skin mends. Sometimes, usually when we are very old, our body gets ill and it can't be made better, no matter how hard the doctors try.

*\* Children whose brother/sister died in hospital need to be reassured that they were cared for; no-one let them die.*

### 4 Was it my fault? Did I say something to make them die?

It wasn't your fault - words don't kill people and death is never a punishment.

*\*Young children are not logical and often believe they can 'wish' something to happen.*

### 5 It's not fair - why was it him/her?

We don't always understand why one person gets ill and dies and another doesn't.

*\* On one level, there is no answer to this.*

### 6 Where have they gone? Where are they now?

No 'answers' – take account or consider the child's religion/cultural background when responding.

Sometimes, rather than asking direct questions, children will try to gauge your views via statements like 'Can I tell you something?' or 'Did you know that...?'

It is important at this time to try to tune in – subtle changes in their tone of voice or body language can be a clue that they want to talk with you.

## Changes at Home

It is important to explain clearly to the child that nothing they said, did or thought has caused the separation. Give responses which take account of the difficulty of separation but remain honest - if a child asks a question you don't have the answer to, a possible response could be

*'That's a good question. Unfortunately I can't answer that. I know it's hard to feel the way you are feeling but I know that you'll be OK.'*

Don't be caught up in the 'who, what, when...' you are there to support the child. If you have any concerns about the child's wellbeing, consult your Management Team or Child Protection Officer as necessary.

## Difficult questions and possible responses

### 1 Why are mum / partner's name and dad / partner's name fighting?

I don't know for sure but it doesn't mean they don't love you.

### 2 Why can't they just get along?

Give an answer that avoids speculation and try to reassure the child.

### 3 Why do I feel unhappy/sad?

Lots of things might have changed...you might feel different and find this hard to talk about, like lots of other kids you might not see one of your parents as much as you used to or want to, you might be worried mum and dad won't work things out.

### 4 Is it my fault?

Definitely not. It's not your fault if your parents decide not to live together.

### 5 Whose side am I on?

You don't have to be on anyone's side. There might be times when you are angry with one or both of them and that's normal. Remember that although parents may say things about each other that can upset you, they still love you very much.

### 6 How can I fix it?

You can't but there's nothing you have done to make it happen. It's OK to ask your parents questions and tell them things you don't like about what is happening, or things that worry you. Remember I am here to listen if you want to talk.

### 7 Do I have to like mum's or dad's new friends?

That's up to you. It's OK to like them. Decide how you feel about your parent's new friends by what they do and say to you.

## Extra Resources

The following web-sites may provide useful information:

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

[www.rainbows.org](http://www.rainbows.org)

[www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk) (for older children)

[www.littlewebsite.org](http://www.littlewebsite.org)

[www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk](http://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk)

[www.richmondshope.org.uk](http://www.richmondshope.org.uk)

[www.ayrshirehospice.org](http://www.ayrshirehospice.org)

### Sources of reference

Bonanno, G. (2010) *The Other Side of Sadness: What New Science Tells Us About Life After Loss*. Basic Books

Carr, A. (1999) *The Handbook of Child & Adolescent Psychology - A Contextual Approach Second Edition*.  
Routledge: London & New York

Dyregrov, A. (1990) *Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Kubler-Ross, E. (1974) *Questions & Answers on Death & Dying*. New York: Macmillan

### Examples of useful books available from Greenwood Teacher's Centre:

Michael Rosen: '*Michael Rosen's Sad Book*'.

Alan Durant: '*Always and Forever*'.

Felicia Law: '*Feelings*'.

Charlotte Zolotow: '*The Old Dog*'.

Rosemary Stones: '*Children Don't Divorce*'.

**If the child's difficulties seem to last unusually long or are unusually severe,  
talk to your Educational Psychologist.**

For further information on change and loss, please contact your school Psychologist.  
Educational Psychology Service, North Ayrshire Council, 5th Floor,  
Cunninghame House, Irvine KA12 8EE Tel: 01294 324500



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