

# GRIEF IN CHILDREN

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[adapted from Dyregrov 1990]

## **Background**

This booklet will help you understand bereaved children and what can be done to help them. Beliefs about death and the rituals and customs surrounding it vary across cultures. As will be seen below, these customs play a very important part in children's grieving, so the ways in which children are helped to grieve will differ depending on their cultural background. We have tried to set out basic principles for helping children below, but they have to be adapted to your culture and community.

## **Children's responses to death**

### *Developing understanding of death*

Already when children are very young, 2-3 years old, they can start to understand parts of what a death means if they experience it happen to one in their close family. They will ask where a person is, and may go searching for that person. By the time they are 5 and 6 they are starting to understand that death is irreversible, that it can happen following illness and suddenly following accidents. In the preschool age they may ask questions showing that they cannot understand the permanency of death; "Next week he will be back", "Who will give him food in the grave?" or "Who will cut his hair?" These questions also reflect that they are very concrete at this age level.

By the age of 8 or 9 years children will generally understand that death is the irreversible end of all physical functioning. Children of this age may still be rather concrete in their thinking and tend to focus on the bodily aspect of dying. They know for example that dead people cannot speak or move, that they do not breathe or eat, and that their heart has stopped beating. They can understand death as both the result of external causes (i.e., violence) and inner processes (i.e., illnesses), and their interest may centre on the physical causes of death and the physical process of decomposition. Although these early school age children begin to understand death as universal and unavoidable, they may find it hard to conceive of death as a possibility for them. Some children of this age begin to develop more abstract concepts of death. These may have a "magical" component, for example in assuming that the dead person can still see or hear the living, and working hard to please them as a result. Children of this age are able to comprehend the perspective of others, and can show compassionate and empathic feelings towards friends who have been bereaved. Older children and adolescents develop an additional understanding that death is inevitable for everyone, and will happen to them personally. Their concept of death becomes more abstract, and they may begin to question whether a soul or spirit exists, and if so what may happen to it at death, as well as physical changes that occur. Adolescents may reflect on justice, meaning, and fate; and perhaps on occult phenomena (omens and superstition) as well.

### *Grief reactions in children*

There is no right or wrong way for children to react to death. Children may react in a variety of ways. Common immediate reactions include: **shock and disbelief**, dismay and protest, apathy and being stunned, and sometimes continuing with usual activities. As grieving proceeds, children often show some of the following: anxiety, vivid memories, sleep difficulties, sadness and longing, anger, guilt, school problems, and physical complaints. Other reactions may occur. Children might show regressive behaviour, social isolation, personality changes, pessimism about the future, or a preoccupation with cause and meaning. This variety of reactions makes children's grief seem confusing for adults, and it can be difficult to know how to help. Some of these reactions are described in more detail below.

### *Immediate reactions*

Shock and disbelief ("It can't be true", "I don't believe you") are common in older children especially, and parents are often surprised that children do not react more strongly. However, it does not mean that something is wrong if a child reacts in this way: this sort of denial is a necessary and helpful protection mechanism which prevents children from becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Other children may react more strongly and can become quite inconsolable, crying for several days after the death. Yet other children might just carry on as if nothing had happened ("Can I go out to play now?"), seeming as if they are on auto-pilot. Again, this sort of reaction may serve a protective function, allowing children to continue with ordinary and well known activities at a time when the world seems chaotic and unsafe.

### *Later reactions*

**Fear and anxiety** is common in children after they have been bereaved. Children who have lost a close family member often fear that the remaining parent will also die ("If it happened to father, it could happen to mother, too") and older children often think through the consequences of this ("who will take care of me if you die?"). The fear that someone else may die tends to be more common than the fear that they themselves will die, although some children do develop a fear of dying themselves. This can result in separation difficulties or clinginess, even in older children, for example, in a fear of sleeping alone, or a refusal to stay alone at home.

**Sleep difficulties** are common, and the problem can be one of getting off to sleep, or waking during the night. This is more likely if the word "sleep" has been used as a way to describe death. Sometimes, children are afraid to go to sleep for fear that they will not wake up.

**Sadness and longing** appear in different ways. Children may cry frequently, or become withdrawn and apathetic. Some children try to hide their sadness so as not to further upset their parents. Longing for the dead person can show itself when children are preoccupied with memories of them, when they feel the dead person's presence, or when they identify with the dead person. Children might seek out places they used to visit with

the dead person, or engage in the same activities they used to do together to make them feel closer to the dead person. Children may sometimes want to look at pictures of the dead person, ask to hear letters read out, or ask to hear stories about the dead person. This can be distressing for adults, but is a normal way for children to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. On occasion, children may feel that they have seen the dead person, or heard their voice, for example at night time. This is quite normal in adults and children, but can be very frightening if children are not prepared for it.

**Anger** is also common in grieving children. It tends to show itself more often in boys, and might take the form of aggression or acting out or temper tantrums. Children may feel angry at death itself for taking the person away from them, or at God for letting it happen, or at adults for not preventing it (or because adults have excluded the child from their grief), or at themselves for not having done more, or at the dead person for deserting the child. Angry feelings may be connected to guilty feelings. **Guilt** can arise when children feel that they did not do enough to prevent the death, or even that they may have caused or contributed to the death. Guilt may derive from the kind of relationship that the child had with the dead person, for example when the child regrets things that were said or done when the person was still alive. Grief can lead to school problems, particularly in attention and concentration. Thoughts and memories of what has happened can interfere with school work, and children who are grieving tend to be slower in their thinking and may lack energy or initiative. Physical complaints may be present, and can include headaches, stomach aches, soreness or aching, and fatigue.

The range of “normal” grief reactions is very broad, but in some children grieving can become complicated. That is, there may be no grief reaction; or it may be delayed, prolonged, or distorted. All children need support in grieving, but those children who show complicated grief reactions are especially in need of help. There is evidence that when children are unable to grieve at the time of death, they are more likely to be affected throughout their lives in all sorts of subtle ways. It is not possible to predict which children will show complicated grief reactions, but there are some types of death which are likely to make grieving more difficult. Unfortunately, the sorts of death which are likely to result in a complicated grief reaction are all too common during disasters.

#### *Children’s experience of death during disasters*

Any kind of death is distressing for children. However, children’s experience of death in disaster generally differs from more “normal deaths” in ways which are likely to make it even harder for them to grieve well. Children’s experience of death during disasters can take many forms, but in general, several main factors make it harder for children. First, in contrast to “usual deaths”, death is more likely to be violent and suddenly, and graphic pictures may be seen in the media. Second, many people are killed during disasters. Third, some disasters involve waiting and the possibility that the body may not be found or interferes with the normal farewell ceremony.

Where death is sudden and violent, it is called a traumatic death. Traumatic death is especially hard for children. Then, many of the sorts of normal grief reactions described

above can be very intense, and they can be combined with the post traumatic reactions. So, for example, children may have vivid intrusive images or fantasies of the death, or they may suffer from nightmares. If this is the case, they are even more likely to be anxious and jumpy.

### **Helping children to grieve**

Death is one of the hardest experiences for children to deal with, and one of the hardest for adults to help with. In the sections below, some ideas are given for ways in which adults can help. Religious rituals and practises are helpful after death: we talk about these below in general terms, but use the guidelines in whichever way is most suitable for your situation.

There is a great deal that can be done to help children who have been bereaved in disasters. Children need time to work through both the emotional and cognitive aspects of bereavement, and activities should be geared so that both of these dimensions are stimulated. In Dyregrov (1990) I summarise some guidelines for adults who are helping children:

#### ***Open and honest communication***

- give age-appropriate explanations
- reduce confusion
- don't give abstract explanations
- don't explain death as "a voyage" or "sleep"

#### ***Give time for cognitive mastery***

- allow questions and conversations
- accept short conversations
- look at albums and photographs
- let children visit the grave
- accept children's play

#### ***Make the loss real***

- let the child participate in rituals
- do not hide your own feelings
- keep reminders of the dead person present

#### ***Stimulate emotional coping***

- work for continuity in home, school, or play group
- avoid unnecessary separations
- talk with children about their anxiety about something happening to their parents or themselves
- talk with children about eventual guilt feelings

Some of these guidelines are explained in more detail below.

### *Participation in the funeral*

If possible, children should be allowed to participate in funerals or memorial services. Sometimes, we think that it will be too upsetting for children to attend funerals, and we try to protect children by excluding them from the ceremony. But children, just as much as adults, need to gain a concrete basis for their grief. The funeral service, as well as being a celebration of someone's life, is a public way of making the death real. When children participate in the ceremony, they can have a concrete basis for their grief. That is, they will see the dead body, and see that it is burned or buried.

But children should be prepared properly for the funeral. This means explaining what will happen during the ceremony, and if the body is to be viewed, describing beforehand what it is likely to look like. Children should also be prepared for adults' strong reactions; and can be told, without frightening them, that they will probably feel sad or anxious too. Depending on the sorts of services held in your community, children can participate in the funeral itself. This might mean reading or saying prayers, or helping physically with the burial. It might be more personal, for example placing something personal on the coffin. It is important that afterwards children are given the opportunity to talk through what has happened and to ask questions.

Often during disasters, the normal rituals and ceremonies surrounding death are not possible. Sometimes, because of the fear for disasters, bodies may be disposed of hurriedly with little ceremony, or they may be buried in the wrong place; and sometimes the body may not be recovered. This will almost certainly make grieving harder for children. It will therefore be useful if you discuss with other group leaders or in your parents group, alternatives that could be used. This might mean for example having some smaller kind of ceremony at home, perhaps with a religious or community leader visiting the home.

### *Communicating with children*

When we communicate with children openly and truthfully, giving them concrete and direct information, then confusion and fantasy on the part of the child can be minimised. It is best to avoid metaphor or abstract concepts (saying for example, that the dead person is asleep): this can make things more confusing for the child.

Parents may be reluctant to talk for fear of upsetting children further, or because they think that they may break down in front of the child. In a similar vein, parents sometimes hide their feelings of sadness from their children, not wanting their children to see them crying and grieving. If parents are continually overwhelmed and cannot talk to their children about the dead person without very strong emotions breaking through, then it may be best for the child to have a trusted adult outside the family with whom they can talk. However, when possible, parents should be available for their children. If they do not talk, and hide their grief, then the child gets the message that it is wrong to talk about the dead person, wrong to cry, and that strong emotions are intolerable. They may also feel that the parents do not care about or remember the dead person if they are never able to speak about them.

Children need to be given time and permission to talk to parents and others about the dead person. Time needs to be given for cognitive mastery, that is, for children to develop an understanding of what has happened. Children will do this by asking questions, depending on their age. Such questions are often penetrating and can be painful for adults to hear and difficult to answer. Questions may be to do with the physical or spiritual aspects of death, or personal questions about the dead person. Carers need to be prepared for such questions. Answers should be truthful and to the point. If you don't know the answer, it is best to say so. If a question is very painful, you might say that you need to think about it, and you will talk to them later, but if you say this, make sure you follow up.

Adults should also be prepared for conversations of this sort to be rather short. This can be shocking for adults: children may ask very penetrating questions, and then go out to play. They may come back with a similar question later. Remember that children need more time than adults to grasp what has happened: their understanding develops in a gradual, step by step fashion, and they may "tumble around" with words and ideas. Children have a shorter "sadness span" than adults and are less tolerant of strong emotions.

Some children may refuse to talk about the death or the dead person. This may be the child's way of protecting himself, and care should be taken not to force children, or push them too quickly. Adults should provide the sort of emotional environment where children are able to explore their feelings, rather than pushing them into talking of things that they are not ready for. Here, using means other than talking are useful: all children need to have some concrete means of working through their grief, and some of these are described below.

#### *Concrete expressions of grief*

Concrete means of expressing grief are a way of making the unreal real. This can be stimulated by keeping memories of the dead person present and visible, as part of the child's daily surroundings. Gradually, the parents and child can remove those things that it will be unnatural to keep. It helps children to remember the dead person if they have objects or memento's which remind them of times they spent together. You may have photographs or pictures of the dead person, and children should be able and encouraged to look at these, perhaps with a parent so that they can talk and ask questions if they want to. Some children like to have special objects - clothing, jewellery, tools - which they can keep in their own special place and look at privately when they want to remember the dead person. Visiting the grave side is often a way for children to come to terms with death. Depending on their age, they may want to do this with family or friends, or alone. Other children may want to make drawings of the dead person, or of gravestones or religious sites. These are not morbid preoccupations, but show the ways in which the child is thinking about and coming to terms with their loss. Parents can encourage this, and sometimes it can be a means to begin talking with children about what has happened.

#### *Emotional coping*

As well as developing an age appropriate understanding of what has happened, through talking, drawing, playing, or visiting the gravesite as above, children also need to find ways to cope emotionally. Children need to feel that they can talk to their parents when necessary, and that they can continue to play and enjoy themselves at times. It is important that a normal routine as possible is re-established: this gives children a sense of security and safety in these very difficult times

#### *Parents' own needs*

Perhaps the most important thing that parents can do for their children after a death in the family is to look after their own needs. Parents should be aware of the sorts of responses that they and their children may show after someone had died. Parents need to give themselves time to grieve if they are to help their children. This can be helped by observing normal mourning periods and anniversaries as far as is possible in the aftermath of disaster. Parents may also find it helpful to seek out peer support: that is, to recognise that at times of crisis, they cannot take on too much, and it is OK to ask for help from others.

#### **Activities for children**

Grief can be a slow process, and much of the “grief work” that children do will be within an emotionally supportive environment at home. The following are suggestions of activities for children to do which can help the grief process:

#### *Letter writing*

Children may sometimes find it odd at first to write a letter to a dead person, but it can often be a great help. Children might be asked what they wish they would have said to the person the last time they saw them, if they knew that that was going to be the last time. What would they say to the person now, if they could speak to them? Does the child feel that he or she has said goodbye to the person who died? Have they told them all they wanted to tell them? Children can be asked to write all this down, in a letter to the dead person. Sometimes, children will then use the letter later to show to a trusted adult as a basis for talking about their grief. More often, children will want to keep the letter themselves as something private that they can refer to and re-read whenever they want to think about or feel close to the person who has died.

#### *Talking to the dead person*

Children are sometimes reluctant to say that they hold internal dialogues with the person who has died, but this is very common, and a useful way of working through grief. Children might just want to tell the dead person what is happening now in their life, or to ask them for advice. Children may be embarrassed that they do this, but it should be encouraged for it is a way of remembering the dead person while at the same time letting go. It will gradually diminish naturally over time.

#### *Journals and diaries*

As with letter writing, keeping a diary or journal can also be an effective way of working through all the grief reactions. Children might keep a personal diary or log of events and feelings. Sometimes, this is a way of keeping an internal dialogue going; sometimes it is

a way of structuring and making sense of the bewildering array of feelings that accompany bereavement. Again, diaries might be used as a basis for talking if the child wants to; or it may be kept as a private and special way for the child to remember.

### *Prayer*

Prayer and other religious practices can be very useful for children. When the child is not from a religious background, then a time of bereavement is not the best time to introduce such concepts. Still, most people, religious or not, take comfort from some kind of prayer or meditation at a time of death. Children are the same, and depending on their age and developmental level, they may talk to God, asking them to take care of the dead person, and of those still living.

### *Rituals and mementos*

Children need to have some concrete means of expressing their grief. It can be very helpful for them to participate in the funeral or burial. Later, it can be helpful for children to visit the grave. This might be done with other family members, but older children often like to go alone so that they can remember and think about the dead person. Often, this is kept quiet: children feel that parents will worry if they know they are going alone to the graveyard or burial site; or children may like to keep it as a special private way to “be with” the dead person when they want to. For some children, it is harder to go because they may fear becoming too upset, or because the graveyard is frightening. It should be encouraged, and children can be helped to find ways to visit the grave regularly, perhaps with family or friends.

Photos or pictures of the dead person are helpful ways for children to remember. Sometimes, children might be encouraged to look at them with parents, or be given permission to look at them when they want to. Otherwise, children might like to keep special objects which belonged to the dead person, or which remind them of the dead person.