

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

The range of what are normal reactions is very wide. Individual children will react differently to the same situation. These differences are determined by a variety of factors including the cognitive and emotional development of the child or young person. However, there are responses that tend to be typical of various age groups.

Early years of school

- Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent.
- They begin to realise that when someone dies there is no coming back, but they need to hear what has happened many times over.
- Some children feel responsible for the death or separation and think it was because they were naughty.
- They may also be worried about who will look after them, eg if they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well.
- They may be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death and want lots of information, such as what happens to the body.
- They may not know what it is they are feeling or know the words to say how they feel, but you will see it in their behaviour and play.

Later primary school years

- Children now understand that death is permanent.
- They can also understand why death happens, eg illness, accident or old age. They can talk about their feelings better although they might not always do so.
- They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, eg blame one parent for a divorce
- They have a strong sense of right and wrong and might have strong views about what has happened.
- They may be interested in life after death and want to know what happens then and ask quite spiritual questions.
- They may still want to know all the facts about what happens to the body or details of an accident.
- As they get older, children are more able to understand what other people are going through as well

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN

- Provide a safe environment where your child feels able to express feelings in whatever way she or he can

- Help them to find ways to show their feelings through play, water play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting or drawing.
- Give factual information to them in a way that they can understand. Don't forget that children need to know what is happening even if they don't ask. Sometimes parents are so busy with their own needs that children can be overlooked.
- Young children may not seem sad when you think they should be, because they still don't really understand what it all really means. This isn't a lack of being sensitive; it is just the stage they are at.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share worries with you. They might be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. If you can't talk about it, find another adult who is close to your child who can. If children can't talk to you about the loss, they might feel that it is not safe to talk about it at all and will continue to have muddled and scary feelings.
- You may have to answer the same question over and over as your child learns to understand what has happened
- It is natural to want to speculate and discuss the event with spouse, partner or friends but it is really important that your child is out of earshot when you do. It is very easy for children to misconstrue what you are saying and become scared or even more confused.
- Be honest. Parents sometimes lie to children because they want to protect them. If you don't tell them what has happened, you may prevent them from dealing with the loss and grieving. This can cause problems when they have other losses in their lives.
- Stick to as many of the family routines as you can. Too many changes will add further stress. Doing the same things as usual helps children to feel safe.
- If your teenager has had a loss and is acting angrily or withdrawing, try to make times available for them to talk, without pushing for answers. If it continues, talk to a health professional about it.
- Try to open the way if they feel unable to talk about their feelings. Say something like 'Some things are really hard to talk about, but talking can help. If you ever want to talk about what has happened, let me know'.
- Let your child's teacher know if there has been a big change or loss in your child's life. Teachers and friends at school can help to support your child.
- Keep some rules about what children are allowed to do. If you think they are taking advantage of the situation you will start to feel angry and that won't help.
- Share your own grief – don't hide your sadness. Children will feel more normal about their own feelings and feel comforted to know that the feelings they have are in line with those of the rest of the family. If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share

feelings with children because it is important that they know that you are in control and can keep them safe.

- Ceremonies such as funerals can be important ways for children as well as adults to help make sense of the big changes in their lives
- Sharing emotions can help people feel connected to others.
- Get support for yourself. Talk with your partner or a friend. Some agencies offer personal grief counselling
- Remember that children grieve in bursts. They have their own individual reactions, and they feel loss just as much as adults but may show it differently.
- Allow times for extra closeness and comfort.
- If your family has a spiritual belief this can be a support to children and parents.
- When it feels right, help your child or teenager to move on and try something new.
- Don't rely on your child for support. You need to support your child
- Be honest, trustworthy and reliable
- Give your grieving child special times with you to talk about feelings.
- The biggest need for children and teenagers who have a loss is that they are supported and cared for and have someone to talk to about it.
- If your child or teenager seems to not be managing, seek help.

Professional help is needed if a child

- Talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- Seems to be preoccupied with dying
- Is unable to concentrate and is withdrawn at school some months later
- Is crying, sad or depressed much of the time
- Does not want to join in or play with other children some months later
- Has severe reactions (such as intense hopelessness or fear) or this level of intensity goes on for more than a month and interferes with their ability to function

As severity can be difficult to determine don't feel you have to be certain before making a talking with your GP or paediatrician about referring your child to a mental health professional who will evaluate whether your child could benefit from some type of intervention.

PARENT TIPS FOR HELPING YOUNGER CHILDREN

Children vary in their capacity to see connections between events and emotions. Many children will benefit from a basic explanation of how disaster-related experiences produce upsetting emotions and physical sensations.

Reactions	Responses	Things you might do or say
Confusion about what happened	Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any information that your child is unclear or confused about regarding if there is a present danger. Remind children that there are people working to keep families safe and that your family can get more help if needed. Let your children know what they can expect to happen next.	"I know other kids said that more floods are coming, but we are now in a place that is safe from floods." Continue to answer questions your children have (without getting irritable) and to reassure them the family is safe. Tell them what's happening, especially about issues regarding school and where they will be living eg if flood or earthquake damage.
Feelings of being responsible. School-age children may have concern that they were somehow at fault, or should have been able to change what happened. They may hesitate to voice their concerns in front of others.	Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you. Offer reassurance and tell them why it was not their fault.	Take your child aside. Explain that, "After a disaster like this, lots of kids-and parents to keep thinking 'What could I have done differently?' or 'I should have been able to do something.' That doesn't mean they were at fault. Or caused this to happen "Remember, the police said no one could stop Mary from walking out in front of the car and it wasn't your fault."

Reactions	Responses	Things you might do or say
Fears of recurrence of the event and reactions to the reminders	<p>Help your child to identify reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it.</p> <p>Reassure them, as often as they need, that they are safe. Protect children from seeing media coverage of the event as it can trigger fears of the disaster happening again.</p>	<p>You might say "I think we need to take a break from the TV right now. When they recognize that they are being reminded of what happened, say, "Try to think to yourself, 'I am upset because I am being reminded of the floods because it is raining, but now there is no flood and I am safe</p>
Retelling the event or acting out the event over and over	<p>Permit the child to talk and act out these reactions. Let them know that this is normal. Encourage positive problem-solving in play or drawing.</p>	<p>"I notice you're drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that lots of kids do that?" "Maybe it would help to draw about how you would like your school to be rebuilt to make it safer."</p>
Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings	<p>Provide a safe place for them to express their fears, anger, sadness, etc. Allow children to cry or be sad; don't expect them to be brave or tough.</p> <p>Try not to ask children directly to describe their emotions (like telling you that they feel sad, scared, confused, or angry), as they often have a hard time finding the words.</p>	<p>"When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad. Would you like to sit here with a blanket until you're feeling better?"</p> <p>Ask them to tell you about physical sensation, for example, you can ask, "How do you feel inside? Do you feel something like butterflies in your tummy or tight all over?"</p>
Sleep problems including bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents.	<p>Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask the child to go into too many details of the bad dream. Temporary sleeping arrangements are okay and you can make a plan with your child to return to normal sleeping habits.</p>	<p>"That was a scary dream. Let's think about some good things you can dream about and I'll rub your back until you fall asleep." "You can stay in our bedroom for the next couple of nights. Then we will spend more time with you in your bed before you go to sleep. If you get scared again, we can talk about it."</p>

Reactions	Responses	Things you might do or say
Concerns about the safety of themselves and others.	Help them to share their worries and give them realistic information.	Create a 'worry-box' where children can write out their worries and place them in the box. Set a time to look these over, problem-solve and come up with answers to the worries.
Altered behavior: Unusually aggressive or restless behavior.	Encourage the child to engage in recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings and frustration.	"I know you didn't mean to slam that door. It must be hard to feel so angry. How about we take a walk? Sometimes getting our bodies moving helps with strong feelings."
Somatic complaints: headaches, stomach-aches, muscle aches for which There seems to be no reason	Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and assurance that this is normal. Be matter-of-fact with your child; giving these non-medical complaints too much attention may increase them.	Make sure the child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water, and gets enough exercise. "How about sitting over there? When you feel better, let me know and we can play cards."
Closely watching your responses and recovery: Not wanting to disturb you with their own worries.	Give children opportunities to talk about their feelings as well as your own. Remain as calm as you can so as not to increase your child's worries.	"Yes, Jack is in hospital because he broke his leg but the doctors have put his leg in a cast and given him some medicine to stop it hurting. I bet it was scary seeing him fall out of the tree like that, wasn't it?"
Concern for other victims and families.	Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undo responsibility.	Help children identify projects that are meaningful (eg drawing pictures, writing poems or stories about a classmate who has died, or making cards for the family)

Managing adolescent reactions to loss and grief

The adolescent years are a time of great change - hormonal changes in the body reveal a multitude of emotions and can cause see-saw mood swings. The adolescent's struggle for independence can result in relationship difficulties within the family and school and they are often agonisingly self-conscious and strive not to seem different to their peers. Dealing with loss and grief can be very difficult at this time when the young person is already coping with many changes. Teenagers grieve in much the same way as adults but because at this stage of their development they often have emotional 'ups and downs' they can become deeply distressed

- Understand death as universal and inevitable - May wish to explore philosophical or religious questions about death
- Need comfort, support and acceptance from peers - Parents and other adults may feel excluded and rejected
- Will feel isolated and unsupported if friends don't know how to provide comfort and support
- Feelings of guilt, fear, frustration, anger and helplessness are common
- Could either become overcautious and reluctant to engage in any risk taking activity, or may engage in reckless behaviour
- May make important decisions impulsively, may become accident prone
- Use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs may increase- May seek comfort from opposite sex and from intimate sexual relationships
- Life may appear meaningless – have a sense of foreshortened future
- May have irrational guilt about surviving
- May have difficulty concentrating and performance at school may suffer
- Boys may feel it is not masculine to be affected by grief
- May take on parental roles to help protect their parents
- Teenagers can be greatly affected by grief following the break-up of relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close to them.
- They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody. They will probably want to get support and spend time with their friends more than their family. However they still need to know that you are there for them to talk to if needed.
- Others just need to do active and noisy things such as go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends to deal with their strong feelings. Still others seek comfort in music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief.

Strategies to support adolescents

- Contact with other adolescents in similar circumstances can be reassuring
- Be alert for rash decision making, encourage adolescents to delay major decisions
- Provide a supportive climate with opportunities to discuss fears, anxieties, feelings of guilt, frustration and anger and help them make sense of what happened, Help adolescents understand death as part of life - involve them in decision making as much as possible
- Help them to describe, share and understand their reactions their feelings.
- Answer questions honestly – there are no good secrets and if you don't know, say so
- Provide information about normal stress reactions and grief processes
- Talk to adolescents as adult-to-adult so you give the message that you respect their feelings, concerns and questions.
- Caution adolescents about doing something risky or impulsive just to feel better without discussing it with a parent or trusted adult. You might say “When something bad like this happens, it is really important to get support from adults you can trust. Is there anyone who helps you feel better when you talk to them? Maybe I can help you get in touch with them”
- Talk about what won't change in their life
- Be alert for students congregating, especially after a suicide
- Make opportunity for artwork. Drawing or painting out feelings, or playing with a piece of clay takes away some of the pain
- Talk about practical concerns. Students need to feel safe and have a sense of being able to rely on adults
- Offer reassurance about:
 - Guilt – tell them, “nothing you said or did can have caused this”
 - Illness of self or others – e.g. do they know cancer isn't catching?
- Offer information which is clear, simple, truthful and repeated. Link explanations to things students know already
- Maintain familiar routines
- Help students to use up feelings in safe ways – physical outlets are important
- Encourage memories – look at photographs, mementos, scrapbooks, tapes, memory boxes
- Encourage them not to be too hard on themselves
- Where appropriate (particularly with a death in the family) prepare the class before the student's return to school, find a student who will be supportive to staff “buddy”

with the student, and tell him or her what you have done. Make sure others know the circumstances

- Listen for confused thinking and discount rumour and dispel speculation e.g. 'that may be so but we don't know that'
- Reduce self-blame
- Allow to talk without dwelling on distressing details
- Reaffirm the future and talk in hopeful terms
- Be alert for band-wagon behaviour that may appear like a 'drama queen/king' seeking attention. The attention they are seeking may be to do with needing support to cope
- Teenagers can be greatly affected by grief following the break-up of relationships, parents' separation or the death of someone close to them
- They can become withdrawn, depressed and moody. They will probably want to get support and spend time with their friends more than their family. However they still need to know that parents and teachers are there for them to talk to if needed
- Young people often show sadness through acting out and angry behaviour which covers up their underlying feelings
- Some may turn to using drugs or alcohol, driving too fast or doing dangerous things. These young people need lots of support
- Some just need to do active and noisy things such as go for a run, dance to loud music or play sport with friends to deal with their strong feelings
- Others seek comfort in music, writing poetry, walking alone or being in a quiet place to deal with their grief
- If your teenager is facing a big loss such as the death of a friend, parent or loved grandparent it may help if he has a task to do at the funeral service or can do something special to remember that person by.
- Be alert for rash decision making, encourage them to delay major decisions
- Give them opportunities to discuss fears, anxieties, feelings of guilt, frustration and anger and help them make sense of what happened
- Help them to describe, share and understand their reactions their feelings.
- Answer questions honestly – there are no good secrets and if you don't know, say so
- Try to keep to your usual family and school routines

Parent Tips for Helping Teenagers

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things you might do or say
Detachment, shame, and guilt	Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings. Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.	"Many kids and adults feel like you do. They feel angry and blame themselves that they couldn't do more. You're not at fault. Remember; even the police said there was nothing more we could have done."
Self-consciousness about their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal	Help teens understand that these feelings are common. Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period.	"I was feeling the same thing; scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when a disaster happens, even if they look calm on the outside." "My cell phone is working again. Why don't you see if you can get hold of Pete to see how he's doing ... and thanks for playing the game with your little sister. She's much better now."
Acting out behavior; using alcohol and drugs, sexual acting out, accident-prone behavior.	Help teens understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. Limit access to alcohol and drugs. Talk about the danger of high-risk sexual activity. On a time-limited basis, have them let you know where they are going and what they're planning to do.	"Many teens and some adults feel out of control and angry after a disaster like this. They think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It's very normal to feel that way but it's not a good idea to act on it." "It's important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you." Assure them that this extra checking in is temporary, just until things have stabilized.

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things you might do or say
Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders	Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. Explain to teens that media coverage of the disaster can trigger fears of it happening again.	"When you're reminded, you might try saying to yourself, 'I am upset now because I am being reminded, but it is different now because the guy who did this is behind bars and everyone is safe'". Suggest that watching the news reports could make it worse, because they are playing the same images over and over. Suggest turning it off now.
Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships: Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even from peers; they may respond strongly to parent's reactions in the crisis.	Explain that the strain on relationships is to be expected. Emphasize that we need family and friends for support during the recovery period. Encourage tolerance for different family member's courses to recovery .Help them accept responsibility for their own feelings.	Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Say, "You know, the fact that we're crabby with each other is completely normal, given what we've been through."I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I am going to work harder to stay calm myself."
Radical changes in attitude	Explain that changes in people's attitudes after a disaster are common, but will return back to normal over time.	"We are all under great stress. When people's lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared or angry, and even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we all will feel better when we get back to a more structured routine."
Wanting premature entrance into adulthood: (e.g., wanting to leave school, get married)	Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to help them feel more in control over things	"I know you're thinking about quitting school. But it is really important not to make big decisions right now. A crisis is not a great time to make major changes

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things you might do or say
<p>Concern for other victims and families</p>	<p>Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undue responsibility.</p>	<p>Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g., clearing debris from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).</p>
<p>High anxiety/arousal -Tension and anxiety are common after disasters. Adolescents (and adults) may be excessively worried about the future, have difficulties sleeping, problems concentrating, and feel jumpy and nervous. These reactions can include rapid heartbeat and sweating</p>	<p>Encourage deep breathing and/or other relaxation skills</p>	<p>“I know you’re finding this pretty hard and I can see that you’re really on edge. It’s a bit the same for me too, I’m finding it hard to get to sleep and feel sort of anxious all the time. Yesterday I tried some breathing and relaxation exercises to calm myself down. I did it 5 times throughout the day and it must have worked because I slept quite well last night and feel good today. I can show you a couple of techniques if you like.</p>