

**Bereaved  
Children's  
Awareness  
Week**  
Children  
grieve too

15-19  
November

childhoodbereavement.ie

# Holding the Hope

Making bereaved children and young people visible

[www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)



**The Irish Childhood  
Bereavement Network**

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# Children Express Grief differently, help them find their way

- Adults instinctively want to protect children
- We can't fix or reverse what has happened, but we can do our best to help children through the reality of this difficult time in an honest and open manner.
- Grief is confusing, hard, lonely & overwhelming





- Children experience 'puddle grief': they tend not to be sad all the time, instead they dip in and out, getting diverted by playing with friends, or doing routine things such as going to school.
- Children feel the loss over a lifetime, and in different ways: as they grow and learn to understand the real meaning of death and loss.



# 4 key steps to support a child's grief

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1

Talk – tell them the truth, have open honest conversations using clear language they can understand

2

Acknowledge their feelings –and encourage them to ask questions to help understand and cope with emotions

3

Explain things in a way that they understand no matter how young

4

Reassure them and be prepared to repeat the information until they can fully get their head around things





# Children's understanding of Death

# Children 0-2

- Very young children do not understand death but feel the absence of familiar person
- They can sense that something has changed but operate in the present once routine is maintained
- They will show clinginess and distress
- Likely to be withdrawn or display outbursts of loud crying and angry tears







## Children from 2-4

- The child does not understand the finality of death and may search for the person.
- They may show sign of regression and irritability sometimes with intensity.
- In time they will establish another relationship.
- As adults we need to respond with care and comfort.

# Children from 4-7

At this age they are learning language, gaining autonomy and exploring the world.

They ask very concrete and challenging questions, as they are not clear about the meaning or finality of death.

They can regress and have nightmares or play violent games.

They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking'

They may not have words to express their emotions, but we can learn a lot about their thoughts and needs when we observe their play.



# Children from 7-11

By this age they usually understand the meaning of death so their questions can be more direct and concrete

They may worry that other people close to them will die as well

Sleep & eating may be disturbed, they may withdraw from friends/normal activities

They need their questions answered and they need support in accepting their changing feelings



# Bereaved Adolescents

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**Grief reactions** depend on their age, personality, experiences with death, and developmental level. Sometimes children don't show any visible reaction at all.

They may;

- May mask fears with rebellion
- Be moody, negative and anti-social
- Use drugs or drink to numb the pain
- Try to find meaning in their powerlessness
- Struggle to prepare for a future that is uncertain
- Feel different from their peers
- Drop out of activities
- Don't always want to talk





# Children Grieve

**In a personal, individual, and unique way.**

**They express grief differently - dipping in and out**

**They understand loss in different ways as they grow up**

**They learn how to express emotions from family**

**Play is an outlet for Grief**

# What helps them

- Compassion, warmth & connection.
- They are prepared for things they might see & experience after the death.
- When they see adults' model healthy coping.
- When they are given space to experience and express their grief in their own ways.
- When they hear words that clarify, empower, and encourage them.
- When they can connect with peers who have also experienced a death.

# Things to do

Acknowledge that the loss is important, and that it matters.

Listen to their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Let them know it is fine to ask questions.

Give age-appropriate information.

Maintain day-to-day routine as much as possible.

If things have to change, include the child in decisions, explain the changes and reassure them.

Make sure they need to know it's okay not to be sad all the time.

Give them time to show their feelings, even anger, which can be an expression of deep hurt and unfairness.

Let them talk about their relationship with the person who has died.

As the child matures, they may need new 'explanations', which can involve revisiting the loss and what it means.

They need to know that they are not to blame; anything they thought or said did not cause the death.

Reassure them that they are loved, and that they will be cared for no matter how difficult grief is for the family.

With good support, most children will not need professional help.



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