

understanding suicide and grief

The grieving child

'My daddy died suddenly when he was 30. I wish my daddy was back. He sort of died too young.' Tim, 4

'My mum died of cancer when she was 34. I hope you remember me, Mama.' Bess 7

My brother, 7 and my sister 4, died at the beach. They drowned. I really miss them. Maria, 11

Children grieve. Significant loss can diminish a child's fundamental security and trust. This trust may need to be rebuilt and this takes time. Grieving children will look for constant reassurance.

Children do not always have the words to talk about what they are experiencing. They often express feelings of 'sad, bad, mad' through their behaviour. Usually they are not being naughty, rather, they are saying, 'I am missing mummy, I am scared, I don't understand what is going on.'

It is important to check out these feelings and to talk about them. Remember that children learn from adult behaviour and seek permission from adults.

This kind of communication can help to strengthen family bonds and to lessen individual isolation.

'If my daddy has died that means mummy can die too and who will look after me?' Sometimes children become, 'little mum' or 'little dad' and assume adult responsibilities. It is important to

acknowledge changes that have happened in the family as a result of the loss and to work out appropriate tasks. Grieving children still need to experience being children.

Play is natural to children. It helps children regain a sense of control and mastery. It is a safe way of giving expression to what is happening 'within.' It is a way to express all kinds of feelings. Play offers adults the opportunity to talk with children about safe ways of expressing 'sad, mad and bad.'

Children's concepts of death

Children tend to say things directly, simply and clearly and their stage of development influences their understanding of death. There are three concepts that are important for children to grasp:

- Death is irreversible and final; it is not 'a trip' from which they will return.
- Death brings about non-functionality — life and body functions stop, the person is not asleep.
- Death is inevitable — everyone will die some time.

Most children understand these concepts by the age of 9 years. Children who are bereaved before the age of 7 are likely to come to a partial understanding of them earlier.

It is important to avoid using euphemisms such as 'sleeping forever' or 'left us...' as these phrases cause confusion for children.

Support After Suicide

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A program of
Jesuit Social Services

Common grief responses in children

Behavioural

- Being more dependent on parents, not wanting to go to school, feeling sick more often, wanting to sleep with parents, needing extra help with tasks normally done alone. There may be themes of death in their stories or play

Cognitive

- Shortened concentration span, confusion, difficulty in making decisions, nightmares, lack of self esteem

Emotional

- Disbelief, numbness, sadness, disorganisation, panic, helplessness, anger, guilt, fear, desire to be an innocent child again, anxiety about others dying

Physical

- Headaches, tiredness, stomach aches, lack of energy, hyperactivity, restlessness, nervousness, appetite changes, sleeping changes

Spiritual

- Why did this happen? Where is Mummy now? Where is heaven? What do you do there? How is God looking after daddy?

The grieving child at school

Meet with the child's teacher and talk about what has happened. It is important that:

- the teacher has correct and appropriate information about the death
- the child's class is appropriately informed and that a decision is made about who will do this and when. The child may want or need to have a say about this. This gives some sense of control and safety
- the teacher puts in place ways of supporting the child if distressed e.g. phoning the parent and/or taking the child to a quiet place in the school
- there is regular contact with the teacher to check perceptions about the child, to share ways of ongoing support for the child and to inform the teacher of any significant occasions that might be coming up.

Ways of supporting a grieving child

- Provide a safe space
- Have a regular routine
- Be consistent, honest, reassuring
- Give adequate and appropriate information
- Include and involve the child in appropriate decision making and in what is happening
- Acknowledge feelings and give support when they are overwhelming
- Provide opportunities to remember, create a memory box and make a memory book, draw, paint, make a collage, write stories, poems, collect photos
- Prepare for special occasions – birthdays, Christmas, holidays, Mother's Day, Father's Day

Reading

- *Someone I love died by Suicide: 'A story for children survivors and those who care for them'*, Doreen Cammarata, 2009.
- *But I Didn't Say Goodbye. For parents and professionals helping child suicide survivors*, B. Rubel, 1999.
- *Red Chocolate Elephants: For children bereaved by suicide*. Diana Sands PhD, 2011.
- *After a Parent's Suicide: Helping Children Heal*, Margo Requarth, 2008.
- *Grief in Children*, Atle Dyregov, 1990
- *Helping children cope with grief*, Rosemary Wells, 1992
- *When dinosaurs die. A guide to understanding death*, LK Brown & M Brown, 1996
- *The Fall Of Freddie The Leaf*, L Buscaglia, 1982
- *Dusty was my friend: coming to terms with loss*, AF Clardy, 1984
- *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, M Fox, 1984
- *Why Do People Die?* C MacGregor, 2002

Web sites

Skylight Trust www.skylight.org.nz

NSW Health http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2002/pdf/supporting_children_.pdf

Web sites—for children

Kids Helpline www.kidshelp.com.au

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Service www.rd4u.org.uk

The Dougy Centre www.dougy.org