

## AGE-RELATED RESPONSES

Children respond to the death of someone close physically, emotionally and behaviourally. Their grief is often intermittent, and the fact that they are distressed and then suddenly want to go and play outside can be disconcerting to adults.

**Aged under two:** Although children may not have the words to express their feelings, they do experience separation as a loss when someone close is gone. Their grief often shows in behaviour such as crying, becoming withdrawn and searching for the person who has died.

**Aged two-five:** Children of this age often ask lots of questions and need the same simple, clear explanation over and over again. “Magical thinking” may lead them to worry that they caused the death. They need things to be explained in concrete language euphemisms such as “we’ve lost Daddy” can confuse them. Their behaviour may regress for a time, such as sleeping in a parent’s bed or returning to nappies.

**Aged five-nine:** At this age children begin to understand that death is irreversible and universal. They may be curious about the process and rituals around death, such as wondering whether dead bodies need food. Clear explanations and a willingness to let them talk about their individual fears and feelings will help.

**Aged nine-13:** Children become much more aware of the impact that a loved one’s death has, including the longer term consequences of their loss. They may experience overpowering feelings of anger or distress and will need reassurance that these feelings are normal. They may feel their bereavement sets them apart from their friends.

**Adolescents:** Some develop risk-taking behaviour others may withdraw or keep themselves too busy to think. Peer group relationships are important during this period, as is ensuring that adults who they can trust are available and supportive.

## BEREAVEMENT AMONG CHILDREN IN CARE

The death of a lone parent is likely to trigger a whole range of further changes which might include coming into care. Aspects of life in care affect the way children and young people experience bereavement. They can feel isolated from the rest of their grieving family, and anxious about surviving relatives who they don’t often see.

Some children will experience a death among their birth family or friends while they are in care. Problems with contact can mean they don’t have time to prepare for a death even when others are expecting it, or that the news is relayed in a way they find difficult.

If the dead person was abusive or neglectful, it can be difficult for carers to acknowledge the extent of a young person's grief. Carers' attempts to offer support can be hampered if they don't know the full circumstances of a death.

## **STRATEGIES TO HELP**

- Children need age-appropriate information about what has happened to the person who has died and what will happen next. Bereaved children and young people who are looked after may lack basic information about the person who died and the circumstances of their death, which may leave them with many difficult questions. Life story work with a skilled worker can help piece together some of the jigsaw.
- Communication helps overcome some of the difficulties which can emerge when family members of different ages and personalities show their grief in different ways. Helping parents to find ways of talking to their children and rehearsing some of the difficult conversations can help.
- Parents may need reassurance that it is OK for their children to see them grieving: this can help children understand that difficult feelings are acceptable. Children can be involved in practical ways too, such as contributing to a funeral by writing a poem.
- Manageable information about children's grief is reassuring for parents, who may be very anxious about the range of responses that their children are showing.
- Children need someone to listen to them and allow them to talk about their worries and concerns. Creative ways of expressing feelings can make them less overwhelming and frightening.
- Holding on to memories can be helpful. Practical ways of promoting this include conversations about the person who died, marking anniversaries and birthdays, or creating a memory box or photo album. Parents who are terminally ill can be supported to start this work for their children before their death, leaving a lasting legacy.

*Alison Penny is co-ordinator of the [Childhood Bereavement Network](#)*

*This article is an abridged version of the *Guide to the Impact of Loss and Bereavement on Children**