

Penhaligon's Friends



Bereavement in The Early Years Babies, Toddlers & Pre-schoolers

When someone they love dies, the understanding a child has will depend on many things, particularly their age and the relationship they had to the deceased. A tiny baby may be aware their caregiver is no longer there but a four-year-old may grasp much more about what has happened when someone has died.

Why do we give children information?

- It keeps the children's trust
- Knowledge can alleviate their distress
- It can encourage communication within the family and relationships
- A child's grief may be postponed if they do not have information & opportunity to be involved in the cultural mourning process

Babies

- Babies are at their most helpless and are entirely reliant on their caregiver.
- They will not have a capacity for understanding the concept of death
- Main caregiver is the 'child's world' and they will be sensitive to that person not being available to them
- Experiences feelings of separation and abandonment
- Aware that the person is missing and may cause them to be anxious and difficult to settle
- Baby is sensitive to the emotions of the grieving caregiver
- Pick up on altered patterns of care and change in caregiver

Infants

- Do not have the language to say how they feel
- Able to picture the primary caregiver internally if they are not present
- May protest at the absence of main caregiver by crying loudly and angrily
- It is common for infants to become withdrawn and lose interest in toys, feeding and interacting with others
- Often experienced as separation anxiety, seeking the absent parent
- May be needier of attention
- Unlikely to retain information for long and need reminding
- Displays of anguish are short-lived

Toddlers & Preschoolers

It is common for children to be curious about death and to try to understand it. They will have natural feelings of grief however may not have the language to be able to explain how they feel. Feelings are much more likely to be shown through their behaviour.

Toddlers and Preschoolers are often aware of death from early on as they hear about it in fairytales and see it on TV. They encounter dead bugs and birds and some may have already experienced the death of a pet or family member. Even with all of this they may not fully understand all aspects of death and what it means.

They may not be able to grasp that death is permanent, inevitable, and something that happens to everyone. They may not really understand what being dead means or that the body no longer works or needs caring for.

No matter how many times you explain it, young children may struggle to fully understand and may think it is temporary or something that can be reversed – like Snow White in the fairy-tale where Prince Charming brings her back to life! It is common for them to ask questions again and their understanding will change as they get older.

Be prepared – Some children show little or no reactions at all and it is very common for children to behave as they did before. It is normal for children to show emotion a little bit at a time and then go back to playing and normal routine.

Children without the language to express themselves often do so through their play. It is common for children to act out what has happened in their play – recreating funerals, talking about death, drawing pictures of coffins. This is all a way of a young child processing what has happened and trying to make sense of it. Be curious about what they are doing and then you can have healthy conversations with them to help them make sense of things.

How to explain death to your toddler or preschooler

Whilst being honest with your child will often feel difficult, as you will naturally want to shelter them from the harsh reality of the grief they now face, you should try to be as open, simple and clear as you can when answering their questions.

Give brief, simple explanations and answers - Young children can't handle too much information at once.

Tell a child only what he or she is capable of understanding. There is no need to avoid the difficult stuff if they are able to understand it. You will need to change your explanations to what the child can grasp. A too complicated reply often confuses a child.

What is said is important, but the way you say it to them is even more important. Be aware of your tone of voice. Try to answer their questions in a simple, factual way without too much emotion.

Tell your child that the person has died. Explain that when someone dies it means that all of their body, from their head to their toes does not work anymore - Children commonly think the head is not part of the body!

Let them know that the person can't feel anything, they can't see or hear anything and they don't eat, drink or move anymore. Be clear that this is different from sleeping and how we are alive when we sleep. Our sleep is important to help us rest our body.

Explain that something very serious must happen to stop a person's body from working. That our bodies are very good at getting better when we are poorly and at mending themselves when we have an accident. Sometimes the doctor might need to help someone get better but sometimes they can't and the person dies.

Your child will need to know that most people live a long, long time and until they are really old. They need to know that someone will always look after them.

Use words that the child can understand. Avoid euphemisms – saying things such as ‘sleeping’ or ‘gone away’ can confuse a child more.

Saying ‘they have gone to a better place’ can also leave a child confused and wondering why they chose to go without them. They may also want to ‘die’ to go to the better place!

Religious and Spiritual Beliefs

Your religious or spiritual beliefs can give you comfort and could give some children comfort. If you are religious and you talk to your child about God and Heaven, then be aware of how a young child may understand this or get confused.

Often young children find it difficult to think that God wanted the person to be with him. Some children go on to fear God as someone who randomly picks people to go up into the sky or to Heaven. Children can be frightened this might happen to them or someone else – like a big hand reaching out of the sky.

Children often confuse ‘Heaven’ and ‘Devon’! Check their understanding by asking them about what they think.

If you believe in spirits or ghosts, you may want to consider how your child will experience this. Will this be frightening for them? Will they be frightened to think a ghost is watching them all the time?

Remember – always check how your child is feeling about any religious or spiritual beliefs you share with them.

You may find it helpful to explain that nobody really knows what happens when someone dies but what we do know is that their body no longer works. You could say that we find it comforting to think that the part that we know and love of them isie within us/in our heart/in a special place called Heaven etc. as this is how we cope with them not being here with us anymore.

Understanding & Common Reactions Toddlers and Preschoolers

- They can understand the feelings of separation and feel insecure and frightened by change
- May see death as something reversible and unable to grasp that all functions of life have ceased
- They may be concerned about the physical well-being of the dead person
- May be concerned with the process of death and what it means
- Concern over the physical well-being of the deceased
- May not understand that death is universal
- Seeing self as initiator / May see death as a punishment
- Often believe in magic and fantasy- ‘Magical Thinking’
- May feel guilt for something they have done or not done
- May ask questions again and again
- Can often see death / loss as an abandonment
- Intense but brief response
- Need honest explanations
- Can naturally have an interest in dead things

- May have intense emotional demonstrations
- Do not understand finality of death
- May ask questions over & over
- Evolving understanding
- Toddler's may look for the person who has died
- May experience dreams, or sensing the presence of the person who has died
- May be clingier and anxious of being away from caregiver
- Can be irritable and have displays of tantrums
- May have changes in eating habits
- Sleep difficulties, toileting problems, bed wetting, soiling
- Regressing in progress, e.g. returning to crawling, wanting a bottle, using baby talk again
- Some children may complain of minor physical ailments

How to help your child

- Keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- Tell them you know they are sad – start to teach and use words that describe feelings
- Tell them they are safe, and who is looking after them
- Keep separated from them as little as possible for a while
- Hold and cuddle them more
- Speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
- Provide comfort items, such as cuddly toy, special blanket etc.
- Give them lots of reassurance that they will be looked after
- You DONT have to have all the answers
- Listen & acknowledge what they are telling you
- Ask them what they think
- Never be afraid to say 'I don't know'
- Try to comfort them with their feelings rather than trying to fix them or make them go away
- Involve them in the funeral process by giving them simple explanations about what to expect – even if they are too young to remember it they may appreciate knowing they were a part of it when they are older.

Remember! Grieving children are still children and like all children may push the boundaries or even use the death or how they feel to behave in a way they shouldn't or wouldn't have done before.

You can acknowledge how the child feels without having to accept inappropriate behaviour. Let them know it is ok to feel the way they do and empathise with them but be clear with them that it is not ok to behave that way. Show them different, more positive, ways of managing their feelings.

Find ways to remember the person who has died, perhaps make a memory box or story book. This could be something you can share with your child as they grow older and you can look at it together at times.

Don't forget that the adults around them need to lead by example – children are quick to copy and pick things up! Share your feelings with your child and don't try to be perfect. The more you help yourself cope the better you will be able to help your child cope – both now and in the future.