



## Cravens Blog 14

### How Children Grieve At Different Ages

Children and younger adults grieve as much as adults, they just show it in different ways. In some cases, the child may be too young to fully comprehend what is happening and how they should be feeling. Other children will turn to adults and try and simulate their behaviour. It is important to know how children and young people grieve and what people can do to help support them during these times. In this guide, we will discuss the common ways children experience grief and how to support them.



#### Offering Support

It can be difficult to offer support to someone who is feeling particularly withdrawn and is struggling to communicate their feelings with you. However, it is important to continue showing your support. You need to be patient and carry on showing that you are there for them when they need to talk. This will happen when they are ready, as long as they do not feel pressure to talk.

#### Grief and different age groups

As the child gets older, they tend to understand more and this is reflected in how they cope with death and express their grief. It is important to remember that although there are rough guides on how children grieve at different ages, the rules are not set in stone. For example, a younger child may deal with grief in a more mature way, especially if they have had to deal with grief more than once at such a young age.

As a general rule of thumb, as the child gets older they tend to understand more and realise exactly what it means when someone dies. This can lead to very different behaviours to those at a younger age as we explain briefly below

#### Babies and Toddlers

When a child is this young, they will have a very limited understanding of what dying means. They may notice someone that is close to them is missing and for toddlers, this can sometimes lead to clingy behaviour or acting out as they struggle to verbalise their feelings. Sleep patterns and routines may be disrupted.

As the toddler gets older and understands a bit more, they may have a lot of questions and feel anxious. This anxiety can lead to them behaving like a younger child. They are still very young and often it is difficult for them to understand that when someone dies, it is permanent. This can lead to them being overwhelmed with how sad they feel.

It is important to start approaching the topic of death at an early age. From discussing death occurring in nature to watching child-friendly films that approach the topic of death. Read more in our Parent's guide to talking to children about grief

### **Primary School Age 5-10**

Children at this age will start to have more of a grasp of what death means and that everyone dies. This realisation can be extremely scary to cope with. When someone dies, a child at this age can also feel like it is somehow their fault. They can also act out or even feel like they need to take on the role of a carer to loved ones. It is important for them to know that nothing is their fault, they do not need to take on the responsibilities of an adult as it is important that they remain children.

### **Secondary School Age 11-16**

Puberty is a challenging time for emotions, especially if they have to deal with grief as well. Being a teenager can be difficult as you are trying to seek independence, be grown up and try and fit in with their peers. Emotions are extremely volatile during this age and teenagers can cope with grief in severely different ways. Some may find solace in their busy social life and school work and may concentrate heavily on these aspects of their lives. Whilst this can be a good distraction, adults should keep an eye on the situation as grief could re-emerge suddenly which can be difficult to deal with.

It is important to reinforce the fact that death is inevitable and their feelings, whatever they may be at that particular point, are valid. Teenagers may not feel like they can open up to their parents, so let them know other people are available to talk to. Whether this be a more distant relative, a member of staff at their school or a help line if they want the conversation to be confidential and remain anonymous.

How a child reacts to death does not solely depend on their age group. There are many other factors that will affect how they grieve including the circumstances that the person died and their relationship with that person. Anxiety and feelings of insecurity will inevitably be heightened if the deceased were a close relative and someone the child loved dearly. It will be a massive change to their lives and will take time for them to come to terms with this.

### **Signs a child is grieving**

- Clinginess

- Excessive crying
  - Problems at school (behaviour or academic problems)
  - Developmental regression (e.g wetting the bed, baby talk, or wanting to drink from a bottle again)
  - Trouble sleeping
  - Struggling to concentrate
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- Anxiety
  - Feelings of abandonment
  - Anger
  - Guilt

### **When to seek professional help**

Whilst all feelings are valid, there may be times when you are concerned about a child's grief and it is important to know what signs to look for which could suggest additional help such as grief counselling might be necessary. You may want to get professional help if you notice the child does the following:

- Believing they are talking to the deceased person
  - Extended periods of depression
  - Symptoms are getting worse over time
  - Expressing a desire to join the deceased person
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- Excessively imitating the deceased person

If you notice these signs, there are many organisations available to help that you can get in touch with that specialise in grief for children

The bottom line is that children will process grief differently and children are not too young to grieve, they will just process grief differently to adults. Whilst it can be difficult to understand grief in children, especially when they are too young to verbalise how they are feeling. Children will often miss their loved one now and then sporadically which is common when they struggle to grasp the concept that death is permanent. Their feelings will also be different as they grow up, but all their feelings are normal and no matter what age, the child needs to understand this. They also need to understand that they have support available. It is important to recognise the signs that a child is grieving so that you are reassured that they are dealing with their emotions in a way that is healthy.