

Reactions in Bereaved Children

- Children may show angry outbursts and be hard to control
- They may become quiet and withdrawn
- They may act as if nothing has happened
- Children may decide to be very good
- Children will ask honest questions and need honest answers
- Children can fantasise the truth if they don't know the facts
- Children will seek reassurance in relation to their lives e.g. 'Will I still play football on Saturdays?'
- Children may feel insecure and cling to their surviving parent
- They may experience sleep disturbance and fear of the dark
- They may 'protect' others by hiding their feelings and thoughts
- Some may have difficulties with concentration and schoolwork

Identifying bereaved children at risk

- Persistent difficulty in talking about the dead parent
- Persistent un-containable aggression
- Persistent symptoms of anxiety, shown by a refusal to go to school and extreme clinging to the surviving parent
- Persistent somatic complaints
- Persistent sleep difficulties or nightmares after a year
- Persistent changes in eating patterns
- Marked long-term social withdrawal
- School difficulties or serious decline in academic performance (after nine months)
- Persistent self-blame or guilt (indicative of clinical depression)
- Self-destructive behaviour or a desire to die: in this case the child should be offered individual work immediately regardless of how long ago the death occurred.

(Worden 1996: pp 147-150)

'The functioning of the surviving parent is the most powerful predictor of a child's adjustment to the death of a parent.'

Worden 1996

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Tel: 051 874013

Published by

The Communications Department
HSE-South
Reference Number: 05-06-0016



Children's Grief

'I rage inside the dark and call her name; I hide inside the dark and close my eyes. The winter of my life is frozen pain. The longing for my mother never dies.'
Elizabeth Kim (Ten Thousand Sorrows 2000)



*"It couldn't be real, could it?
Surely I will wake up and find it
was only a dream"*

Childrens' Grief

Children suffer grief when they lose someone close in life. Their grief is like splashing in puddles. It can rise for short periods, be very intense and then disappear as they return to play or some other activity. Their grief is different than adult grief as they do not have the same understanding of death and may be encountering it for the first time.

What Do Children Need?

Information

Bereaved children need to be told what has happened, as soon as possible after a death has occurred. This should be done in clear simple language. Don't flood them with information, be guided by the questions they ask. Tell them the truth in an age appropriate way. More facts can be given as they get older.

Involvement

Give children a choice regarding seeing the dead parent/relative. This can allow them say goodbye. Describe to them what this will be like, where it will take place and what the person will look like. Give them choice as to how they might be involved in the funeral ritual.

Reassurance/Routine

If possible keep children at home at the time of a death. Usual activities and routines need to be maintained. Children need normal setting of boundaries. They need information and reassurance as to where parents are in order to feel secure. Encourage them to be with friends. Allow them to return to school as soon as possible but let the school know that a death has occurred.

To Express Feelings

Bereaved children should feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts and feelings about grief and should feel supported in doing so in an appropriate way.

Childrens' Response to Death

Children will respond to the death of an important person in their lives depending on:

- Their age and understanding of death
- The nature of the relationship with the person who died
- The circumstances of the death
- The reaction of other family members
- The overall effect on the family unit
- Their culture and familys' beliefs
- Their self esteem and self worth

Childrens' Knowledge of Death

Children under Two have no understanding of death but fear being abandoned. They may search for the deceased. The child may be clingy and needs cuddles and comfort.

Age Two to Four the child does not understand that death is permanent and often asks questions like 'when will Daddy be home?' They will often play out what is happening around them.

Age Five to Nine This is the age when children have 'magical thinking'. They think that they can cause death by their words or actions. They think of death like monsters and bogeymen. They can be pre-occupied by death and they need to explore their feelings of guilt and responsibility



To be bereaved as a child is to be bereaved for life

Age Nine to Twelve Children understand that death is the end of life. They realise that all living things die, it is universal. They understand that death is irreversible. They need reassurances about lifestyle e.g. money and home.

Children Understand Death when:

- They know it is permanent
- They know it is universal
- They know it is inevitable
- They know it is not magical but natural

We need to realise that when a child is bereaved their trust in the world is shattered. As adults we have a responsibility to support them and listen to their fears and anxieties. We need to reassure them that certain aspects of their lives will continue without disturbance and that it is normal to feel as they do. We need to be aware that younger children lack the emotional language to express their feelings regarding the loss they have experienced. We must remember that grief is a developmental process for children and those who are bereaved early in life often articulate their loss years later when they have the emotional language to express their pain.

