

PARENTS SUPPORTING CHILDREN THROUGH A BEREAVEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Coping with the loss of a loved one is a difficult and confusing time for children, as well as the adults who are supporting them. When that death happens during a pandemic that has brought increased levels of stress and uncertainty into our lives, as well as impacted the ability for people to come together and grieve and as they would under normal circumstances, it can cause even more distress.

While there are no easy answers to this situation, it can be helpful to know more about how grief can affect children, how to look after their wellbeing during this time, and where you can find support.

How each child grieves will depend on many things, such as their age, gender, personality, relationship with the person who has died, earlier experience of loss or death, and how others around them are grieving.

It is important for adults not to assume that a child is not affected or aware of the death.

While a child may appear unconcerned at times – even playing, or doing their usual activities – they will be processing the loss in their own way.

WHAT A PRE-SCHOOL CHILD MIGHT EXPERIENCE OR SHOW

Younger children can find it hard to understand that death is permanent. However, they do understand separation and feeling insecure and frightened.

Common grief reactions include:

- looking for the person who has died;
- dreaming about the person who has died;
- playing with dolls or role-playing involving the person who died;
- clinginess and anxiety;
- irritable;
- withdrawing, being quiet; and
- changes in eating, sleeping, toileting.

This age group needs a lot of reassurance that they will be safe and looked after.

WHAT A PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILD MIGHT EXPERIENCE OR SHOW

At this age, children are still learning about death. Because of this, they may have blunt questions about what happened to the person and their body.

Common grief reactions include:

- looking for the person who has died;
- blaming themselves for the death;
- easily distracted and forgetful;
- physical complaints such as headaches;
- withdrawing, being quiet; and
- irritable, defiant.

As with adults, it is very normal for grief to resurface later, even well after the death.

HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH

Frequent reassurance, comfort and calmness

Children of any age will constantly look to adults for comfort and security after a loss. Try not to be separated from them during this time, give them cuddles, hold their hand, and talk to them in a calm voice. Tell them who is looking after them, and reassure them they are safe.

Keep up routines

Continue with normal everyday activities as much as possible. If you are under lockdown conditions, or other restrictions due to COVID-19, you can carry out household chores together and try to keep a regular mealtime schedule.

Encourage play

Children often use play to help them process what has happened. Playing with dolls, drawing, and writing can all help with the grieving process.

Explain death is a part of life

Older children in particular will ask about death, and it is very important not to ignore their questions. It can be helpful to use examples from nature such as watching plants grow, bloom, and die. Being open about your own sadness can help them come to understand their own feelings. Talking to younger children about death will slowly help them understand bit-by-bit.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Supporting a child while also grieving a loss yourself is a very distressing situation. The COVID-19 environment is likely to add further concerns and challenges.

Always consider your own wellbeing during this time, and do what you can to ensure you are also supported.

If you are worried about yourself or your child, always seek help and advice.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Some children will want to help plan or be part of the funeral service. If you can't be physically present due to COVID-19, it is often possible to record a video message to be played at the funeral, or write a message or poem that can be read out by someone at the service

- Many funeral homes and churches now offer a live stream video service you may be able to watch with your child
- Think of rituals that may be meaningful for their memorial of the passing of their loved one
- You and your child could plant a flower or a tree in memory of the person, light a candle, or put together a scrapbook of your happy times together.

SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Kids Health – Grief Resources

www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group

Victim Support

www.victimsupport.org.nz

Grief Centre

www.griefcentre.org.nz

1737 – Support from Trained Counsellors

Call or text 1737 any time

Youthline

www.youthline.co.nz

COVID-19 Alert Levels

www.covid19.govt.nz

COVID-19
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