



Guy's Gift

**Support for children and young people
in Coventry and Warwickshire**

• bereavement • change • loss • separation

Call 0845 467 3035 or email info@guysgift.co.uk



Ages and stages of grief

Pre-school age children

Children's understanding of the world around them changes as they grow. This is the same with their understanding of death and dying.

Babies and young children don't have any understanding of what death actually is, but they recognise changes in their circumstances and can pick up on feelings and emotions of those around them too.

Young children won't understand the finality of death and might expect that the person who has died will come back for a special occasion, for example.

With babies, things to look out for are:

- Increased crying, or being unsettled
- Sleep disruption
- Not feeding as well as usual

You can support babies by reassuring, being consistent with care routine and behaviours, providing familiarity in terms of routine, place, comfort,...

With children under 3, things to look out for are:

- Being more emotional than normal
- More 'clingy' with the primary care-giver
- Regression in skills

You can support children under three by offering reassurance, maintaining normal routines, being consistent with care routine and behaviours, providing familiarity in terms of routine, place, comfort,...

With children under 5, things to look out for are:

- Asking a lot of questions about what has happened, and often repeating these questions
- Feelings might be displayed through play or role-play activity
- Regression in skills
- Worried about leaving their primary care-giver
- More emotional than normal, and this might be displayed through outbursts
- 'puddle jumping' – very emotional and wanting to talk about the death one minute, and then the next they are happy and playing.

You can support children under five by maintaining normal routine and boundaries, being clear in your explanations (avoid using euphemisms as this can cause confusions, for example if you lose something it can usually be found but that's not the case if we refer to someone who has died as 'lost'), talk openly about feelings and share memories with them.

5 to 8 years olds

As children begin school and grow in the understanding of the world around them, so their understanding of death and dying grows too.

Typically, in this age group children begin to understand the permanency of death, and that death is universal. They may also question if it is something they did that caused the person to die.

Things to look out for with 5 to 8 year olds are:

- Worried about someone else important to them dying, this can often present itself with not wanting to leave a primary care-giver in case something happens to them
- Asking a lot of questions about what has happened, and often repeating these questions
- Changes in behaviour – more withdrawn than usual, or more prone to emotional outbursts

You can support 5 to 8 year olds by offering explanations using clear language (avoid using euphemisms as this can cause confusions, for example if you lose something it can usually be found but that's not the case if we refer to someone who has died as 'lost'); making sure that all relevant information is shared with the child and that they're not left to make up events/facts for themselves; maintain normal routines and expectations; encourage talking about feelings and emotions.

8 to 12 years olds

As children enter the second half of primary school, their understanding of death is increased.

Children in this age group will be much more aware of death, and will worry about the death of others who are important to them.

Things to look out for with 8 to 12 year olds are:

- Lack of concentration/motivation in activities they have previously engaged well in
- Changes in behaviour – more withdrawn than usual, or more prone to emotional outbursts
- Struggling to manage or regulate their emotions.
- Seeking support from adults more frequently, either emotionally or with school work for example
- Overwhelmed by thoughts and worries

You can support 8 to 12 year olds by offering reassurance that their feelings are valid and helping them to find safe strategies to deal with their emotions; give clear opportunities to seek support when needed (this works best if there is a specific plan agreed with the child); sharing feelings and memories together; maintaining routine and expectations; sharing relevant information, factually, with the child to help them understand what has happened.

13 years+

Teenagers are far more aware of the concept of death, than any of the younger ages. They may be very aware of feelings, but unable to name them (which can lead to frustration).

Teenagers are also shifting towards independence, and have more ties outside of the family than they might have previously. This need for independence can conflict with the need for support when grieving.

Teenagers also have a strong drive to be similar to their peers, and grieving can be a very isolating experience. This can sometimes prevent teenagers from seeking support when it is needed.

Things to look out for with teenagers are:

- Reluctance to show feelings, suppressing emotions
- Lack of concentration/motivation in activities they have previously engaged well in
- Emotional mood swings
- Engaging in risky behaviour

You can support teenagers by encouraging talking about feelings, and providing a safe space for this to happen in an agreed way; normalising feelings and emotions; maintaining expectations, routines and boundaries; involving them in decision-making, both in the early days after the death has happened in terms of funeral plans, and also later in terms of how they may access emotional support; share memories together.

Other considerations

It's important to remember that children are all different, and that whilst we can broadly think about how different age groups will react to death, some children may have understanding below their physical age, or indeed above. Support should be offered based on the child's needs and not their age alone. It is normal for children to react differently to one another, even within the same family.

Across all age groups, we know that using clear and concise language helps; along with ensuring the facts have been shared as openly as possible. If you're using language which could be mis-interpreted it can cause confusion. If children aren't aware of the facts about what happened, they can often create their own story. This story can be worse than the reality. So ensuring children are supported to understand, in an age appropriate way can help them to process the death and their feelings which arise.

Time frames will be different for everyone. For some children and young people, they may not show any emotion or reaction to the death for some time after it has happened, for others it will be immediate. There is no right way to mourn the death of someone important, and no right or wrong emotions to display. Supporting safe ways to manage the emotions, when they present is really important.