

Time to read: 10 minutes

## 5 things that you can do to help a pre-school child in grief

### 1. Start talking

When someone dies, we sometimes use different words to try and soften the pain of grief. This can confuse children and, though it may feel like you are protecting them, even very young children can learn what death is, starting with clear, simple words.

Telling children that death is losing someone or that they have passed away, suggests that they may be found or may pass back into life. Very young children can be confused, if you use words like Heaven, that they might think of as any other place that can be visited by car or bus.

When children understand what death is, they can start to understand their feelings about it. Use words like dead and dying and then explain that death is the body stopping forever and that when you die you stop feeling pain and you stop thinking.

### 2. Know what to expect from children at different stages

You know your child best and what to expect. There are rough guides for ages, but children's understanding and emotional maturity varies, depending on them and what they have known. By the age of 4, your child may understand the idea of death, having seen dead animals or insects, showing them that death is natural and part of a cycle. They might be too young to know that death is forever, and you may have to remind them many times. This is normal, as is the reaction of this age group to listen for a short time, go and do something completely different, then ask about it again later.

#### Finding the right way to tell them

Choose a time when they are not tired or hungry. Try and talk calmly. It is ok for you to let them know that you have some sad news. It is also ok for you to look sad when you are telling them. That shows that your feelings match your words. They may get sad and cry as well and that is natural. Reacting with sadness to sad news is what we expect.

#### Questions

Let them know that it is ok for them to ask questions and if you cannot think of a good answer, let them know that you will think about it and then come back to them. If you do say that it is important that you do come back with something to say. If we do not talk to children about loss, they will feel and remember only a sense of loss. If we give them an understanding of death and feelings of grief, it will show them the reasons for feeling loss.

### 3. Find ways for them to show feelings

It is ok to not feel ok. This is a sad time and with young children you can say that sometimes we are angry and sad together. This shows that death is a natural, though distressing, part of life.

Toddlers, babies, and young children are likely to show that they are upset by changes in their behaviour. Children might go back to behave in a younger way. This is normal. If you can react calmly to that behaviour in the way that you would do for a younger child, then they will learn that their feelings are allowed and they will find their experience of grief easier to cope with. They will learn how people react to death by seeing how those around them react.

#### What they see and what they hear

This does not mean that you should hide your feelings. It is useful if you can explain, briefly, how you are feeling. This will help young children to make sense of what they see and what they feel around them. You can talk about feeling sad because someone died or missing doing things together with them. Giving examples of the ways that you feel gives them the words that they need to fit how they are feeling. Starting to give them words that explain their feelings is something that they can learn to use for the rest of their life. It is an important part of their education.

#### Using touch to comfort

All ages of children benefit from the soothing effect of touch. Being held, rocked, sung to, continue to be the ways that children are soothed in distress. At times of grief, they need more. Adults often feel the same way and that closeness can calm them in the same way.

#### Keep routines the same

Routines help babies, toddlers, and young children to feel safe. Whilst it might feel tempting to react differently if they hit out or break things, by letting them know that certain behaviour is not ok, in the way that you normally would, lets them know that some things stay the same. It may be difficult for you to do this calmly and if you cannot, it is good to recognise that afterwards and to apologise. If you are feeling less patient, because of your grief, then you can say that you got angry because you were feeling sad, and that the anger came from the sadness.

#### Actions not words

When babies and children show you how they are feeling, rather than tell you, it is because they do not have the words yet. Adults will recognise that words cannot always explain a feeling. Another example of how children act in grief, is by withdrawing, playing less. This is natural. Do not feel that you must encourage them to play if they would rather sit and feel sad. If a safe person is with them, it allows them to feel sad and be quiet without feeling that that feeling is somehow wrong.

## Death in play

Do not be alarmed if death becomes part of play, stories, and pictures that children draw. It is another way that they gain an understanding of what happened and that the person who has died is still dead.

### 4. Grief looks different at different stages

#### Babies and Toddlers

At this stage, babies and toddlers do not have an idea of what death is but they can feel that something big has changed and it upsets them. This is particularly true if one of their main caregivers has died. They will notice the difference in routines, how things happen and how it feels. They may feel abandoned and cling to you more, looking to be soothed. They will show their distress in the only way that they can, by crying. This crying might well be difficult to soothe. It may take time for them to adjust. Babies sense your distress, so it is important that you take time to soothe yourself, if you can. If there is someone else that can take a turn, ask. Sometimes, getting moving can help to soothe you and your baby.

Feeding and sleeping routines may be disrupted by this, as grief does with all ages. Like other ages, adjustment may take time. If you can stay with them during their distress, they will slowly learn that they are safe, and routines will slowly return to something more like what you would expect.

#### Toddlers to 5 years of age

At this stage, children understand more and ask more questions. They will still be focusing on themselves. It is natural at their stage of development that they cannot think about how you may be feeling. When they hear about somebody having died, they may react in several ways. They may be sad, but they might also react by going blank, or by giggling. They may distract themselves, going back to what they were doing, quickly. This is not a sign that they are lacking in some way. They are not able to stay with such a big and strange piece of news for long. They tend to jump in and out of it, like a muddy puddle. This was, they get to find out about what death means and what happens next at their own pace. If you can support them at their pace, it will help them to feel safer in their grief.

They tend to If it is the first time that they have known about someone close to them dying, they will not know how others react. They may act more anxiously and worry about being separated. You may have to plan with your nursery or school and share what works best. You may have to do things a little differently for a while but keeping them away for a long time might be a difficult habit to break. Could they take a cuddly toy from home with them, to help them to feel safe? Dreamcatchers over the bed can help children to feel that their bad dreams can be caught.

Children might look for the person that has died. They might keep doing it after you have explained that they are not coming back. This is normal. It is part of their learning that death is forever.

## 5. Help them to remember

As they grow up, children understand death differently and want to ask more questions. Their memories change and they may get upset by forgetting details of how somebody looked or sounded. They might still have a calm or joyful feeling in their heart or head when they say that person's name. This is a feelings memory that does not have to have pictures or sounds to go with it.

Children might have a mixture of feelings towards the person that died. This is normal. Grief is complicated, as are all our relationships.

Make a start and it may make a difference

Useful website

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/early-years-support-for-the-family>

Useful book

Muddles Puddles and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone Has Died

(Early Years) by Diana Crossley