



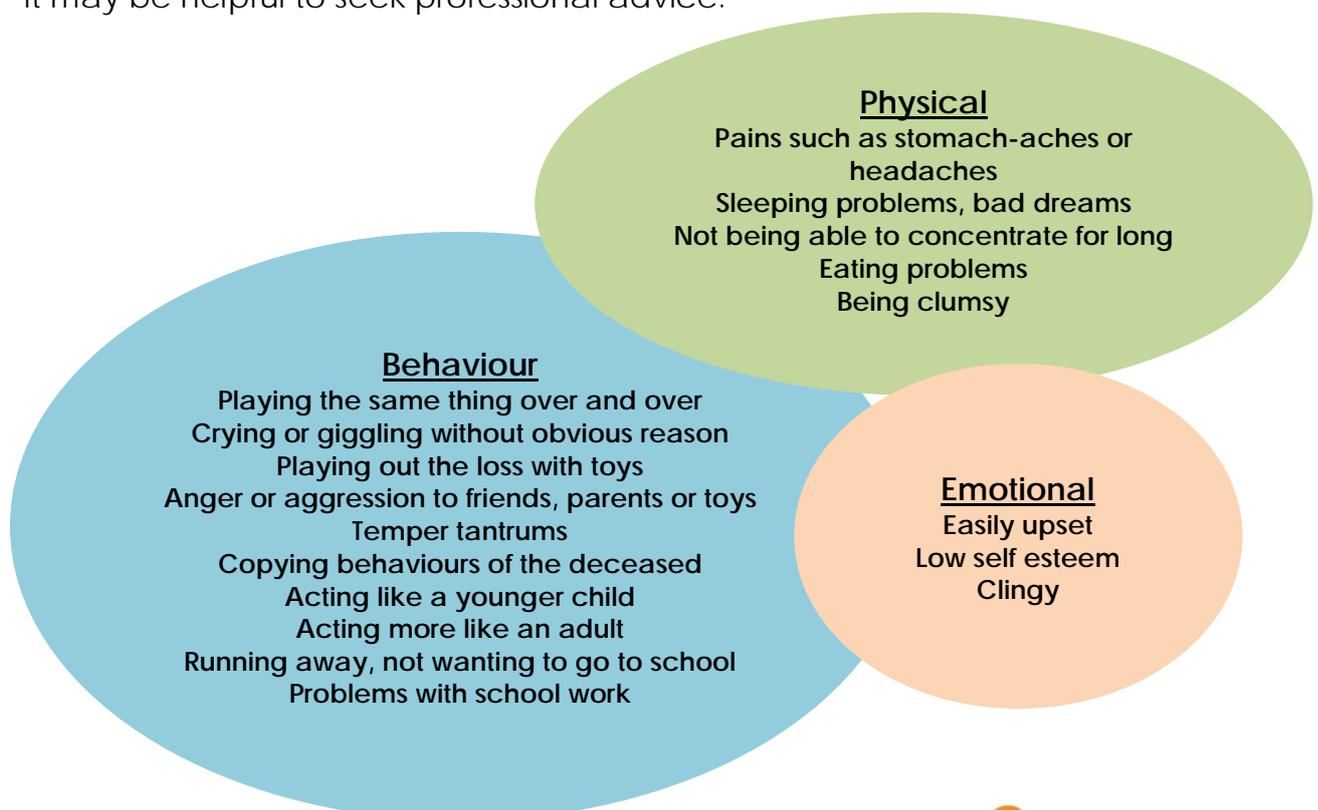
HELPING CHILDREN WITH GRIEF

Children will be faced with many losses in their lives. It is a common instinct for parents and other carers to want to protect children from the pain of grief. However it is important for children to learn how to grieve and to be given the opportunity to grieve. Children will learn about grieving from the adults in their life.

Children experience the same feelings as adults but tend to express their grief differently:

- Grief for children is not constant, but comes in bursts. It is not unusual to explain a death to a child and find that they do not seem affected by it, or they want to go out and play. This does not mean they do not feel the pain of the loss.
- Younger children especially may ask the same questions many times. You may have to tell the story over and over again. As children get older they will grieve again. The loss will mean different things to them at different stages.
- Often children express their feelings through behaviour and play.

Children may react to a loss and show their grief in many different ways as shown below. These are normal ways for children to work through their grief. However, where these behaviours become too repetitive or last a long time, it may be helpful to seek professional advice.





TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT A SUICIDE DEATH

It is important to be honest with your children about a suicide in the family. Children need to know the truth within their ability to understand. Children's understanding of death and suicide will vary depending on their age and maturity.

- Be honest and consistent.
- Ask your child what death means. Explain it to them and be sure they understand.
- Explain in small steps. Don't overwhelm your child with details.
- Use simple language to explain suicide. Children are not always aware of the word suicide although they may understand the concept. Use other words as well such as 'suicide is when someone makes their body stop working.'
- Avoid explanations such as 'he's gone to sleep.' Children take things very literally. They may start to fear going to sleep.
- Answer questions as they come up. Don't feel you have to have all the answers, if you don't know, say so. If you're unsure what your child means by a question, ask them to be more specific.
- Unless there are very good reasons for not saying this, it is wise to emphasise that suicide is a not a good idea because there are always other ways to solve problems.
- Children may believe that because they have thought or said something, they have contributed to the death. Reassure your children that they are not responsible.
- Children often believe that the pain and hurt will last forever. Reassure them the process will take time but that they will feel better.
- Accept their feelings and share your own.
- Remember no two children grieve in the same way. Ask your children questions to help you understand how they are feeling.

The following is an example of a parent talking to their child about a suicide. This way of explaining fits with what children have said they prefer and understand

..."I have something to tell you. This morning we got some bad news... your Uncle Jeff has died... he killed himself. This means that he made his body stop working. Do you understand what that means?"...

"It seems he was very unhappy and he didn't know how to talk to anyone about how bad he felt. Sometimes people can't find a way out of their problems and that's why it's important to remember that there is always someone that you can talk to about your worries. We would have like to have helped Uncle Jeff but his suicide has stopped us from doing that. It's important that you know that Uncle Jeff loved you and it wasn't anything you did that made him feel so bad ... The next few days are going to be sad for everyone, just remember that you can ask questions and talk about Uncle Jeff whenever you want to." ¹



If you have already told your child a different story about what happened it is not too late to change this. Tell your child the truth and explain that sometimes adults find it hard to tell their children about death.

HOW YOU CAN HELP YOUR CHILDREN WITH THEIR GRIEF

At school

1. Advise the school of the death.
2. When your child returns to school, talk to the teacher and the school psychologist. Discuss any potential problems such as making gifts for Mother's Day or Father's Day. They will be able to help you monitor how your child is managing.
3. Practise with your child what they can say to their friends and teachers.

"Many children are more distressed by not knowing the words to say than by the content of what they have to say." ²

4. Remember to involve other people who may be able to help, for example relatives, teacher or school psychologist. Sometimes children, like adults, find it easier to talk to someone outside the family.

At Home

1. Maintain routines and expectations such as bedtime, homework and sporting activities. This gives children a sense of consistency and security.
2. Birthdays or special occasions may stir up feelings and memories. Include children in the planning of these events.
3. Encourage your children to play with friends. Their friends can be an important support.
4. Play with your children. Spend some time together doing activities.
5. Let your children see your grief. They will learn about grieving from you.
6. Don't compare your children or their behaviour to the person who died.
7. Seek professional help if you have any questions or concerns.

In helping children to understand and cope with death remember the following principles:

Be truthful, be consistent, be loving and be accepting.



SOME SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES TO DO WITH YOUNG CHILDREN³

- Create a memory box. Put mementoes of your loved one into a special box and look at them anytime. Draw or write about what you might collect to put in your memory box.
 - Look at pictures of past good times.
 - Read together. Books can encourage understanding and discussion. Three suggestions are:
 - Lifetimes, A beautiful way to explain death to children. Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen, ISBN: 978-0-553-34402-8.
 - Someone I Love Died by Suicide, A story for child survivors and those who care for them. Doreen Cammarata, ISBN 978-0-9788681-9-2.
 - Healing a teens grieving heart, 100 practical ideas for families, friends and caregivers. Alan D. Wolfelt, ISBN 978-1-879651-24-1
 - Use a toy phone to talk about what happened.
 - Use clay to show your thoughts. Pound it if you are angry.
 - Draw or paint to show how you feel. You can make a 'feelings' book. Include some things that make you feel safe or loved. Put the date on each page to show how your feelings change as time goes on.
 - Act out what happened or how you feel with puppets or dolls.
 - Buy a helium balloon. Take it with you to a park or pretty place. Let go of your sad feelings as you let go of the balloon. Watch it float away with your sad feelings.
- Computer programs are useful for story writing. "Storybook Weaver Deluxe" is a storytelling program for children aged 6 and over. The computer will read the story aloud once it is written.

¹Noonan, K. & Douglas A. (2001). Supporting Children after Suicide – Information for parents and other caregivers. Available from the Liverpool Community Health Service (NSW). Telephone (02) 9828 4844.

²Dunne, E. & Wilbur, M.M. (1999). Survivors of Suicide: Coping with the Suicide of a Loved One. Lifeline Melbourne and The Victorian State Coroners Office.

³Adapted from: Silverman, J., (1999). Help Me Say Goodbye. Minneapolis: Fairview Press. ISBN 1 57749 085 1

This material has been adapted from a number of sources including the above references, particularly reference 1.