

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Grief and Bereavement in Children Information for Parents and Caregivers

Definition

Grief is the normal process when there is a death or a loss, such as a divorce. Grief may produce physical, mental, social, or emotional reactions. Physical reactions can include changes in appetite, physical problems such as headaches or stomachaches, sleeping problems, and illness. Mental reactions can include anger, guilt, sadness, worry, and despair. Social reactions can include withdrawal from normal activities and the need to be near others or to be apart from others. Grief processes also depend on the situation surrounding the death or loss, the relationship with the person who died and the person's attachment to that person.

Bereavement is the period after a loss during which grief is experienced. The time of bereavement depends on several factors including a person's attachment to the person or thing that was lost and the amount of time spent anticipating the loss.

Why Do We Care?

- The way in which children are communicated with and managed at the time of a loss will affect how they are able to grieve at the time and how they manage loss in the future.
- Children who grieve may display many symptoms that impact their functioning including:

Young children

- Bedwetting
- Thumb sucking
- Clinging to adults
- Exaggerated fears
- Excessive crying
- Temper tantrums

Older children

- Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches, sleeping and eating problems)
- Mood swings
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- Increase in risk-taking and self-destructive behaviors
- Anger; aggression; fighting; oppositional behavior
- Withdrawal from adults and/or peers
- Depression; sadness
- Lack of concentration and attention

- Students are often confronted with both natural death and death through unnatural means such as murder or suicide.
- The media constantly brings this issue to life for children, and they need an outlet to deal with the grief of unsettling images and thoughts.

What Can We Do About It?

- **Provide a structured environment that is predictable and consistent;** limit choices; introduce small, manageable choices over time.
- **Contain “acting out” behavior;** insist that children express their wants, needs, and feelings with words, not by acting out. This is also true for teens, which have a tendency to act out in anger rather than expressing how they feel directly.
- **Encourage them to let you know when they are worried** or having a difficult time, crying can be very cathartic.
- **Let your child know that she/he is safe.** Often when children are exposed to trauma they worry about their own safety and the safety of their family members. It is a good idea to keep them from seeing too many pictures of the event.
- **Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death.** Children often have many questions about death and may need to ask them again and again, be patient and answer these questions as openly and honestly as possible. Talk to your child about death in a way she/he can understand.
- **Give the child affection and nurturing;** attempt to connect with them.
- **Help your child maintain a routine.** It is helpful for your child to continue with daily activities. Ensuring that she/he is sleeping enough and eating healthily helps them to maintain a clear head.
- **Be patient with regressive behaviors** such as thumb sucking and bed wetting.
- **Put together a memory book.** This is a good exercise to help your child experience his/her emotions in a positive way.
- **Be aware of your own need to grieve.** Parents have often experienced the same loss as their children, and should allow themselves to experience grief and get support.

Helpful Forms and Handouts

- AACAP: <http://www.aacap.org>
 - Children and Grief: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/grief.htm>
 - Children’s Sleep Problems: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/sleep.htm>
 - Helping Children after a Disaster: <http://www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/disaster.htm>
- National Center for Victims of Crime:
 - Children and Grief: <http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?dbName=DocumentViewer&DocumentID=32354>

Other Resources

- The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families: <http://www.dougy.org/>

- Beyond Indigo: www.beyondindigo.com is a great resource for all individuals going through any type of grieving, specifically:
 - <http://www.beyondindigo.com/articles/article.php/artID/200570> has a list of storybooks for younger children about death and loss.
 - <http://www.beyondindigo.com/articles/article.php/artID/200569> has a list of books that help adults understand what grief is like for children and how to help kids cope.
 - <http://www.beyondindigo.com/articles/article.php/artID/200277> discusses grieving in the context of the adolescent.
 - <http://www.beyondindigo.com/channels/topic.php/topic/24> is a list of onsite links discussing the grieving child pertaining to terrorism, the loss of a parent/other family member, and general information.
- <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=141&id=1662> illustrates how children grieve and their level of understanding per age group.
- <http://www.cgcmaine.org/docs/subdocs/activities.htm> contains activities for grieving children to help them get their feelings out.

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance (<http://www.msmha.org>).*