

## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF AND LOSS

Children can lose a parent through death or through separation. In both cases the child may grieve the loss of the parent. However, how this grief is expressed will differ from child to child.

When a parent dies, children, like adults, go through a grieving process. The grieving process is important as children have to learn to carry on with life without their parent being present. Parents and caregivers can support the children in this process, although how best to support an individual child will depend on a number of factors, including the age of the child, their ability to understand the loss, and their emotional and social maturity.

In order to lead a happy and fulfilling life following the death of a parent a child needs time and support to:

- 1) accept the reality of the loss,
- 2) experience the emotional pain associated with the loss,
- 3) adjust to the environment they find themselves in as a result of the parent's absence,
- 4) find a place for the memory of the lost parent in their own emotional life.

### Accepting the reality of the loss

Children five years of age or younger will have difficulty accepting the reality of a loss as they won't understand that death is permanent. These young children may ask questions such as where their parent is and when they will be coming home.

If children do not come to understand that their parent is dead, they will not fully experience the emotional pain of the loss and tackle the remaining tasks of the grief process. Parents and caregivers are most helpful when they are truthful about the parent's death. Using phrases such as the person who died just 'went to sleep' or that your family 'lost' the person may be taken literally. A child may develop fears around sleeping or abandonment and loss.

It is likely that the message that the parent is dead and will not be returning will need to be repeated over and over for some time. This can be upsetting for the remaining parent/caregiver, but is part of the process of helping young children understand.

### What you can do to help

Gently helping the child to understand the death may involve attending a funeral. Explaining what to expect is essential. For example, by explaining that the body of the person who died is going to be in a large box called a coffin, there will be someone who will talk about the person who

died and there will be other people who will be sad and that there will be a lot of crying. If, on the other hand, a child is not prepared, they are likely to find the event very upsetting.

Visiting the cemetery may also be appropriate. Having photographs of their parent with them and allowing this to be part of conversations will also help. There are many resources, including some great children's books, available to help children understand death and grieving. Try to access some of these.

When a child is separated from the parent, for example as a result of separation or a court order, the child will experience loss. Unfortunately, there is often uncertainty whether this will be a permanent situation. Under this condition of uncertainty, it is impossible to help a child accept the reality of the situation, when the likelihood of a reunion with the parent is not known.

### **Experiencing the emotional pain associated with the loss**

Children's grief experience has many similarities to that experienced by adults. Sadness, anger, guilt, and anxiety are all present to differing degrees and are expressed differently across the age span.

Generally, children aged 5 years or more can understand that death is permanent, but until they are older (eight or more years of age), their ability to cope with their emotions is very limited. This age group is, therefore, a particularly vulnerable group who require a high level of emotional support. It is important to allow the children to express their emotional reactions and be supported with cuddles and reassurance.

Witnessing the grief of adults can be helpful, as the child learns that crying is a natural reaction to emotional pain and loss. But a judgement should be made about protecting children from witnessing adults who are overwhelmed and unable to contain their grief as this can be frightening for children. Keep in mind that there are important cultural differences in how grief is expressed and how funerals are conducted.

### **Adjusting to the environment they find themselves in as a result of the parent's absence**

The extent to which a child's life changes following a separation or loss is related to the amount of change in the child's life—for example, where they live, where they go to school, friends they have, the bed they sleep in, and what they have for dinner. The more the child's environment changes, the more they will be affected and the longer it will take to adapt to the loss.

**Finding a place for the memory of the lost parent in the emotional life of the child**

For children who have lost a parent they were attached to, it is important to find a way of keeping the memory of the parent alive. For example, making verbal references to the person, such as: "your mum/dad would have laughed at that", or putting together a photo album, or life-story book. This helps the child develop a new relationship with the memory or spirit of the person they have lost.