

Navigating the ocean of childhood loss

Grief is an intricate and multifaceted emotion, often changing like the waves of the ocean, from morning to night. When it comes to children, navigating these waters of loss can be particularly daunting. Children experience grief differently from adults and understanding these nuances is crucial in providing the support they need during challenging times. As a parent, you cannot protect your child from the pain of loss, but you can help them feel safe.

The experience of grief in children can stem from various sources, including the loss of a loved one, divorce, separation, relocation, being pushed out of a friendship group, or the passing of a pet. Regardless of the cause, the impact can be profound and enduring if not addressed appropriately. One of the fundamental differences between adults and children in dealing with grief lies in their understanding of death and loss. Young children may struggle to grasp the permanence of death, often exhibiting confusion or denial. They may ask repetitive questions or express their belief that the pet or person will return, leading to moments of frustration for caregivers who may find it challenging to explain the finality of death, especially when they are also dealing with the loss themselves.

Children's grief may manifest in various behavioural and emotional changes. Some children may become withdrawn, exhibiting poor signs of sadness, anxiety or depression. Others may act out through aggression, irritability or regression to earlier stages of development such as bed-wetting, thumb-sucking or the development of new fears and phobias. These changes are typically a child's way of expressing their inner turmoil and attempting to seek comfort, reassurance and control.

The age and developmental stage of a child plays a significant role in how they express grief. Younger children may struggle to verbalise their feelings and rely more on non-verbal methods of expression, such as playing, as a defence mechanism to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed. Older children and adolescents may have a better grasp of the events but may still find it challenging to navigate these emotions – a situation which tends to lead to isolation or alienation from their peers and family or acting aggressive and angry towards someone else, other than the deceased. Self-harming behaviours may also be part of trying to control the pain.

It is hard to know how a child will react to death. The aim – not only in the event of a traumatic incident but when dealing with children in general – is to strive towards creating a safe and supportive environment where emotions can be shared and experienced, without shame or guilt. Encouraging open communication, validating their feelings rather than dismissing it and providing age-appropriate explanations of what happened can assist in the processing of their feelings.

Try not to volunteer too much information, as this might be overwhelming. If you do share information, do so honestly and clearly to avoid later resentment and confusion. When discussing death, it is important to not use euphemisms (for example "Gran went to sleep"), as children can be extremely literal in their understanding. This can lead to other fears such as being scared of going to bed or being expectant of the deceased waking up. This is also likely to interfere with the development of emotional regulation and healthy coping mechanisms.

Whether or not to attend the funeral is a personal decision that depends entirely on you and your child. Funerals can be helpful for closure, but some children are simply not ready for such an intense experience. Never force a child to attend a funeral. If they would like to attend, prepare them well for what they are likely to see and feel. Keep in mind that even the most well-prepared children are still just that – children – and their behaviours can be unpredictable. If you decide against taking them to the funeral, there are other ways to say goodbye such as planting a tree, sharing stories or releasing flowers into the ocean as alternatives to closure.

Maintaining rituals and routines can provide a sense of stability and comfort during times of upheaval. Sticking to regular bedtime routines and attending typical extra-curricular activities can help in maintaining a sense of normalcy. Seeking professional support from a therapist may be beneficial for those who are unable to cope and where behaviours are no longer typical.

Be mindful of not ignoring or suppressing your own grief, as it tends to lead to uncontrollable and explosive reactions. It is important for us to share and show our emotions as it reassures our children that feeling sad or upset is normal and teaches healthy ways of dealing with intense emotions.

"Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is to learn to swim." – Vicki Harrison.

Tragically, grief is an inevitable part of life and our children are not immune to its impact. As parents, we can only aim to act as life vests during times of uncertainty. ☹️

Jana Vermeulen

