

Children and grief

When life hurts...

Nine-year-old Serge and his family have been going through a tough time. Two years ago his Mum and Dad separated. Serge moved with his Dad to a new house and, for a while, Serge hardly saw his Mum. He had to move schools too. All these changes took a lot of getting used to.

Earlier this year Serge's grandfather died suddenly. Serge felt really bad but he put on a brave face because he wanted to cheer up his Dad. He did his best to help out at home too. It was hard, but things slowly started to get better.

Then, just as Serge was beginning to feel happy again, his pet cat disappeared. That was the last straw. Since then Serge has been miserable. He cries really easily and wants to be with his Dad all the time. He doesn't seem interested in having fun the way he used to.

How grief affects children

Like adults, children experience grief when they lose someone or something they feel close to. A death in the family is particularly hard for children, but this is not the only time grief occurs. Other kinds of losses can also lead to grief reactions. These may include:

- the death of a family member, friend or pet
- separation of parents and family break-up
- change of schools or moving house
- loss of a friendship
- relocating to a new country
- having a disability or medical illness
- having a family member in hospital for a long time.

Children's grief reactions commonly include crying, being anxious, having bad dreams and clinging to parents or carers. Children may also show their distress by being angry, irritable, unsettled, or losing motivation for school and other activities. Sometimes children show their distress by behaving in ways you would expect from a younger child. For example, they might start wetting the bed at night, sucking their thumb, or using baby talk.

Children need support to cope

Children need lots of reassurance and support from caring adults to help them come to terms with a major loss. While grief is a normal reaction to loss, feelings of anxiety or sadness may be intense and long-lasting – especially if the child loses a primary carer, or if the loss occurs in traumatic circumstances. Sometimes, like Serge in the story, children keep grief inside until they can't manage it by themselves any more.

How parents and carers can help

Knowing what to say and how to talk to children to help with loss and grief is not easy, especially when you are also experiencing a loss and all the feelings that go with it.

Acknowledge children's feelings

Let children know that you understand they are having difficult feelings. Offer support and reassurance. Let them talk about feelings and ask questions.

Children need to know

Explain what has happened in plain language that children can understand. Knowing what has happened helps children find ways to cope.

Maintain routines

Along with loss there are usually big changes. Keeping up normal routines as far as possible reduces the number of changes and helps children feel more secure.

Talk about your feelings

Children are sensitive to your moods and reactions. Telling children how you feel, and how you are managing your feelings, helps children make sense of their own feelings. It is important to be real with children, but try not to burden them with your emotional needs. By showing children that you can cope with grief, even though you are sad, you can help them understand grief as a normal part of life.

Get your own support

Sometimes your own grief will make it difficult for you to support your child. It can be helpful to seek support to help you through your own grief, whether from friends, family or a professional counsellor.

Let the school know

Letting your child's teachers know what has happened means they can support and monitor your child's wellbeing at school.

When grief is very intense, or when it lasts a long time, it can interfere with children's ability to manage everyday life. It may also lead to mental health problems such as anxiety or depression.

If you are concerned that your child is not coping with a loss you should consider seeking additional help from a health professional such as your local doctor or psychologist.

Parents and carers can help children learn to cope with loss and grief by providing support and reassurance to help children understand that loss and grief are a normal part of life.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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