

Grief and Loss

What is the issue?

Not all children and adolescents have two parents to give them love and security for a number of reasons. In NSW, an increasing number of families are experiencing the trauma and disruption of separation and divorce. Families may also experience loss through the illness or death of a family member. Even the death of a loved pet or a close friend moving away may cause significant distress to children and adolescents.

Moving house can also be disturbing for children and adolescents. They may find losing contact with familiar places and people, changing schools, and having to make new friends very stressful.

Children and adolescents may feel vulnerable and insecure when families experience a loss. They may believe that they are responsible for what has happened. It is possible for them to misunderstand what is happening unless parents discuss the situation and any proposed changes with them.

When families separate

Parents may be devastated or relieved by a separation. However, children and adolescents are almost always confused and unsettled. They may feel responsible for their parents breaking-up or for getting them back together.

Let them know you will both still be their parents even though you no longer live together. Parents' commitment to their children's well-being is vital.

Warning signs in children and adolescents.

Children and adolescents usually don't show their pain and suffering all at once. They may seem to be over it and then their distress may suddenly reappear.

Some of the ways they cope with loss are:

- Acting younger than their age. This may tell you that it is all too much and they need to be less grown up and less independent while they gather strength.
- Trying to over-achieve at school or at home so that it is not obvious that they really are suffering.
- Having difficulty concentrating at school and being preoccupied with their feelings.
- Trying to defend their parent, brother or sister. They may try to look after someone who seems weaker.
- Some may show anger or hostility in play, towards their toys, brothers or sisters or parents.

Children may feel vulnerable and insecure when families experience a loss.

Pre-school children see death as temporary and reversible, like the cartoon characters on their television. By the ages of 5 to 9, children start to think more like adults but still can't believe it could happen to them or anyone they know.

As well as the shock and confusion a child feels at the death of a family member, adults' own feelings may make it difficult for them to cope with the emotional and physical needs of their children. Professional counselling may help guide families through this difficult time.

How can I help?

There are a number of ways parents can help their children cope with loss.

- Let them know they are loved and that you are there for them.
- Let them know that it is not their fault.
- Answer their questions simply and honestly and where possible include them when making decisions that will affect them.
- Be tolerant of their behaviours as it may be their only way of expressing their feelings.
- Try to find out how they are feeling. Let them cry, talk or express their anger in a safe way.
- If they can't talk to you, encourage them to talk to others whom they trust.
- Keep things as familiar as you can (school, friends, pets, precious possessions).
- It is OK to show your feelings. Showing your children how you cope will help them.
- Let their school or teacher know what is happening.

Find support for yourself as this is the key to surviving difficult times.

Everyone needs time to adjust to changes and deal with feelings of grief and loss. Children and young people may not want to tell you what they are feeling for fear they will upset you or make you angry. Your own feelings may be so strong that you may not notice or feel able to cope with what your children need.

When there is a death in the family

Funerals provide a means of saying goodbye to a loved one. It is helpful to include children. However, if children are frightened of attending a funeral they should not be forced. Instead help them have their own farewell such as lighting a candle or saying a prayer.

Spend as much time as possible with the child and let them know they can show their feelings. They may display their feelings of sadness on and off for a long period of time. Anger is a natural reaction to the loss of someone special. This may be shown by aggressive play, nightmares or irritability. Children may express anger towards the surviving members of the family or may become fearful about their safety.

Young children may persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. This should pass after a few weeks. If not, seek professional assistance.

24 hour telephone services are:

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800
Lifeline 131 114

Bereavement C.A.R.E. Centre
(A free service is available for people experiencing financial difficulties)
Tel: 02 9869 3330

Youthline (youth counselling)
(Sydney) Tel: 02 9951 5522
(Parramatta) Tel: 02 9633 3666

Other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as paediatricians and child psychologists may also be able to provide help.

Compassionate Friends
for parents whose children have died
Tel: 02 9290 2355
Rural tollfree: 1800 671 621

Where can I get more information or assistance?

In an emergency you can contact your:

- **general practitioner** or local hospital **Emergency Department**
- local **Area Health Service** (during business hours) including community health centres or specialist child and adolescent mental health services