

## Grief in children who have lost a friend or whānau member

As with trauma, how children react to grief differs from adults, and is affected by their age. When a death is traumatic, as with adults this can make their grief process more complex.

### **Children's beliefs about death change as they grow up**

Pre-school children may see it as temporary – that the person is “asleep” but will wake up. Primary school children start to think of it more like adults, but often believe it will not happen to them or anyone they know.

### **Children do not always have the words to talk about how they are feeling**

Children do not always have the words to talk about how they are feeling, so tend to express their feelings through behaviour – being withdrawn, sulking, being naughty, tantrums, refusing to go to school and so on. Children tend to grieve in “bursts”, so may go from seeming completely back to normal, to being distressed, repeatedly.

### **So it is important to be more than usually patient**

It is important to be more than usually patient, and to check out how they are feeling and try to talk to them about this. As with trauma, while it is natural to try to protect your children from pain and grief, this is not helpful. Children look to adults to learn how to behave, so asking how they are feeling, asking what questions they have, and explaining things in words appropriate to their age, is key.

Sharing some of your own sadness, while also showing them that you can cope and life can go on, is helpful. Explaining death in words they will understand is also helpful. Avoid using words that may confuse them, such as “gone to sleep forever”, or “passed on”.

### **It is also common for children experiencing grief to become more clingy or anxious, and fearful**

It is also common for children experiencing grief to become more clingy or anxious, and fearful that other important figures in their life may die. It is also, as with trauma, common for them to develop physical symptoms – stomach aches, headaches – and to also have usual sleep routines change. Reassurance and comforting are important for them to feel safe and loved.

### **These practical tips will help**

The practical tips above are helpful for supporting your child through grief after a traumatic death. Maintaining usual routines, and ensuring they are encouraged to play, and express themselves through drawing, are all good strategies.

It is also helpful to ensure their teacher and school are aware of what has happened to your child, and to agree with the teacher how they can support your child, how this information is shared with their classmates, and what to do if your child becomes distressed at school.

As with adults, grief in children passes over a number of months, your love, consistency, and care of your child, along with continuing to encourage them to talk, and sharing information in words they understand, is what is most healing for them.