

Grief in Children and Teenagers

Just like adults, children and teenagers may lose loved ones during this influenza epidemic. The death of a loved one is a traumatic event, a painful experience that is difficult and time-consuming to deal with.

How Do Children and Teenagers Grieve?

Each child or teenager is unique, with his or her own ways of understanding death and expressing sadness, discomfort, and fears. Their reactions will be affected by their age, maturity, culture, connection to the deceased person, support network, and many other factors.

It is not easy to tell a child that a loved one has died and help him or her through the grieving process. You are probably grieving yourself. What should you say, and how?

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula for avoiding the pain of losing a loved one. However, a better understanding of how children understand and react to death can be useful in understanding what words and actions will comfort them.



Signs of Grief

BABIES, BIRTH TO 2 YEARS OLD

Anouka, 2 months:

"Where is the nice person who takes care of me, feeds me, and cuddles me?"

Very young children do not have a concept of death. They strongly feel the physical absence of the people who care for them, give them attention, love, and comfort, and are essential to their proper development. Although they do not know about death, they can strongly pick up on what others feel, such as sadness and despair, and react to it in their behaviour.

Possible Reactions

- Crying, wanting to be picked up more often, latching on.
- Being more agitated and irritable.
- Feeling insecurity and separation anxiety.

YOUNG CHILDREN, 3 TO 5 YEARS OLD

Charles, 4 and a half:

"Mommy told me that Daddy is dead forever. I'm bored, he's been dead for long enough, it's time for him to come back. When I get bored I cry a lot, but not for a long time. I'm going to go play."

Children at this age have some understanding of death: to them it is a separation, an abandonment. They don't understand that death is forever. Old people may die, but only for a while, and can come back to life like in cartoons. Children need to shake off suffering by being active. They may play games dealing with death, funerals, or burial. They also need to keep the deceased person in their imagination, for example by talking to them or keeping something that belonged to them. This is how they deal with the reality of death. Remember that this is the age of magical thought. They may believe that their thoughts affected things, making them feel responsible for the death or think they have the power to return the person to life.

Possible Reactions

- Having feelings of sadness or abandonment.
- Regressing – thumb-sucking, bedwetting.
- Insecurity and anxiety manifesting as headaches or stomach aches.
- Nightmares, troubled sleep, difficulty falling asleep.

- Changes in appetite.
- Aggression or anger: hitting their stuffed animals, quarrelling with friends.
- Having problems with relationships with playmates. The child may be afraid of getting attached to other people for fear of losing them too.
- Changeable moods: feeling sad one minute and going off to play the next.
- Worrying about the deceased person's well-being.

CHILDREN, 6 TO 8 YEARS OLD

Takomi, 7 years old, almost 8:

"My cousin died. He was ten. I thought only wrinkly old people died. What happens when you're buried? How long does it take before you turn into a skeleton?"

At this age, children start to have a better understanding of time and to understand that the deceased person will not come back. However, death only happens to old and very sick people. Children dealing with the death of a young person learn that young people can die too, and may become afraid of dying themselves. From six to eight, children are very sensitive and are influenced by the reactions of those around them, such as sadness and pain, which may lead them to suppress their own sadness so as not to add to their parents' and loved ones' sorrow.

Possible Reactions

- Feeling guilty and responsible for the death, although not necessarily consciously.
- Fear of getting sick or dying. The child may express this fear in words, such as "I'm scared of being all alone at night," or in physical reactions such as stomach aches, headaches, heartburn, etc. He or she may also experience the fear silently.
- Problems at school, such as trouble paying attention or concentrating, lowered grades, loss of interest in school, refusal to go to school for fear of leaving their loved ones.
- Behaviour problems at home and at school, such as aggression, anger, and fighting.
- Being ashamed of being different from other children; for example, being ashamed at not having a father anymore and not being able to make a Father's Day card like the others.
- Feeling sad, crying, being afraid of abandonment; or on the contrary, being in good spirits.

PRE-TEENS, 9 TO 12 YEARS OLD

Tania, 11 years old:

"I feel bad too, but I don't cry in front of other people. I wonder what happens when you die. Do you go somewhere? Is there such a thing as souls and heaven?"

At this age, children know that everyone will eventually die, including them. They understand that death is final and irreversible. Like younger children, they may still feel guilty and responsible for the death. They are also very sensitive to their loved ones' feelings and may take on their emotions or reactions. They may take on an inappropriate role of trying to comfort or console their bereaved parents. At this age, they alternate between being childlike and mature. They wonder about what happens after death and what happens to the soul. They may also ask for details about the funeral and what will happen to the deceased person's body.

Possible Reactions

- Fear about the future, about what will become of them.
- Feeling sad, crying, or on the contrary, not wanting to express their sadness.
- Problems at school, such as trouble paying attention or concentrating, lowered grades, loss of interest in school.
- Mood swings, irritability, aggression, fighting more frequently with siblings, parents, or friends.
- Insecurity, stress, anxiety.

TEENAGERS

Jean-François ("Jeff") 16 years old:

"I can't believe it. My buddy Loïc's dead. It isn't fair, he was way too young to die. A bunch of us got together, we told stories about him, we laughed and felt bad together."

Teenagers feel invulnerable: they understand that death is the end of life, but to them it is something that happens to other people. The death of someone close to them disrupts their worldview and makes them aware of their own death. Their reactions to loss fluctuate between those of a child and an adult. However, at this age, their feeling of invulnerability and their desire to be autonomous, distance themselves from their parents, and stand on their own feet can cause reactions that may be disconcerting to adults.

Possible Reactions

- Appearing indifferent and unaffected by what has happened. This is their way of taking it in.
- Refusing to confide in their family and rejecting its support. Nonetheless, they may well be in shock and need to be reassured and know and feel they can count on the adults close to them.
- Preferring the company of their friends.
- Being aggressive and accusatory towards their family.
- Skipping classes, feeling uninterested.
- Feeling anger, sadness, guilt.
- Feeling anxiety and insecurity.
- Using alcohol or drugs.

Ways to Improve the Situation

You may also be grieving for the deceased person yourself, which may make you feel unable and unavailable to give your child the support he or she needs for the time being. This is normal and there is no need to feel guilty. Do not hesitate to ask for or accept help from a family member or friend your child trusts, who can take over for you.

BABIES, 0 TO 2 YEARS OLD

- Be aware that they are strongly affected by the loss of emotional bonds that are essential to their safety and development. This makes it all the more important to ensure that a major figure in their life takes over and ensures their needs, such as care, love, and safety, are met.
- With infants, keep eye contact, talk to them softly, rock them, cuddle them, etc.
- Keep them in a familiar environment with the people and surroundings they know well.
- As much as possible, maintain the normal routine for bedtime, meals, naps, etc.
- Talk to them gently about what has happened. Even if they do not understand, they will be comforted.

YOUNG CHILDREN, 3 TO 5 YEARS OLD

- Avoid acting like nothing is wrong on the theory that they need to be protected, they are too young to understand, etc. Children need to know what is going on. Prepare them; do not wait for them to find out some other way without being prepared.
- Explain the situation in simple words that they will understand. For example, you can tell them that their mommy, daddy, little brother, or friend has died and will not come back. Tell them it is okay to feel bad. Even if they do not understand everything, they will feel comforted.
- Be frank; do not use euphemisms, such as saying that daddy has gone to sleep forever or flown up to the sky. Children know that when you go to sleep, you normally wake up; they may develop a fear of going to sleep.
- Reassure them that nobody will abandon them.
- Help them express their emotions by playing or drawing.
- Help them not to feel guilty. Reassure them by telling them often that the death is not their fault, that they didn't do anything wrong. Tell them that the person will not come back no matter how much they want them to.

- If they want, let them come to the funeral home, the funeral, and the burial. Explain what will happen: the casket, the viewing, the people who will be there and who may be crying, etc. If they do not want to come to the funeral, have them go through a little ritual of mourning of their own, to let them say their own goodbyes.
- Reassure them concretely about the near future: tell them that they will still be picked up at day care, etc.
- Do not be alarmed if they play games about death, funerals, etc. This is a normal way for them to express what they are feeling through play.
- Inform their day care centre about the situation. The day care workers are potential allies who can help them deal with their grief.
- Listen to them when they talk about their concerns about the deceased person's well-being. Reassure them that the deceased person does not feel pain, hunger, fear, etc.
- As much as possible, maintain the normal routine for bedtime, meals, naps, etc.

CHILDREN, 6 TO 8 YEARS OLD

- Answer their questions frankly. Admit that you do not have all the answers.
- Do not hesitate to talk about how you feel and to show your sadness. Tell them that feeling sad is nothing to be ashamed of and that you feel sad too. This gives them permission to feel sadness as well.
- Help them express what they are feeling through playing, drawing, activities, and discussion.
- Respect their way of living their grief. Some children will cry; others won't. This does not mean that they are not sad; they are dealing with their grief in their own way.
- Inform their school about the situation. Their teachers are potential allies who can help them deal with their grief.
- Reassure them concretely about the near future: tell them that someone will still help them with homework, wait for them at the bus stop, etc. Reassure them that you love them and that you and other family members are there for them.
- As much as possible, maintain the normal routine and limits that help them keep their bearings: going to school, playing sports, etc.
- Let them choose a memento belonging to the deceased person.

PRE-TEENS 9 TO 12 YEARS OLD

- Do not hesitate to talk about how you feel, such as sadness, anger, or guilt, and tell them that it is normal. Encourage them to talk to someone they trust.
- Be open and receptive to their questions. Ask them how they see death.
- Reassure and comfort them. Tell them that the death is not their fault.
- If they feel guilty, suggest that they write to the deceased person or keep a diary where they can write what they would like to have told them, how they feel, etc.
- If they are aggressive or angry, encourage them to take part in activities that will help them blow off steam.
- Inform their school about the situation.
- As much as possible, maintain the normal routine and limits that help them keep their bearings: going to school, playing sports, seeing friends, etc.

TEENAGERS

- Explain the situation and the circumstances of the death.
- Respect their way of living their grief and their need to be alone or with friends. Offer to listen ("If you need to talk, I'm here, don't hesitate.") If they don't want to talk, don't insist; the important thing is that they know they can count on you. Teenagers want to know that adults are available but do not want to be overprotected.
- Share memories with them; suggest a symbolic activity like making a collage of photos, collecting stories about the deceased person, etc.
- Tell them how you feel; tell them that crying, being afraid, etc., is nothing to be ashamed of and that it happens to you too. Do not ridicule their worries or fears ("Don't be a baby").
- As much as possible, maintain the normal rules, limits, curfews, etc.
- Encourage them to continue their activities and see their friends.
- Inform their school about the situation.

Things Are Getting Better When...

Grieving children or teenagers do not necessarily have the words they need to express their grief, and they are often tempted to hide their feelings. It may therefore be difficult to know how they really feel. The best way to know is to observe their behaviour, emotions, and physical state following the death.

Here are some signs that your child or teenager is on the right track:

- Their reactions gradually subside.
- Their general state is good.
- They have periods of happiness.
- They let themselves express their emotions, reactions, and questions.
- They show interest in a variety of activities.
- They eat and sleep properly.
- They cry or are silent (don't forget, they have suffered a significant loss).

They will do even better if:

- those around them accept they are dealing with their grief at their own pace;
- the adults around them provide the proper support over the years;
- their friends are feeling better.

When to Seek Help

If your child or teenager is having numerous negative reactions that are becoming prolonged and more intense, this is a sign that they are having trouble dealing with their grief and need professional help. Do not hesitate to consult a professional.

Here are some examples:

- In babies, no longer seeking eye contact, sleeping more, etc.
- Insomnia, frequent nightmares, loss of appetite, weight loss.
- Isolation, turning in on themselves, for example no longer feeling like playing or seeing their friends.
- Abusing alcohol or drugs.
- A significant lack of interest in school, cutting classes, etc.
- Wanting to be with the deceased person and expressing this repeatedly.
- Having suicidal thoughts, mentioning suicide.

Caution!

Children and teenagers may be doing better for several months, then suddenly start to have difficult emotions again about their loss. This is because, as they mature, their understanding of death improves. Accordingly, they may relive their grief in the future. This is a necessary step that is a healthy reaction to a loss early in life. It is normal and may persist into adulthood.

Available Resources

Telephone

- Your local health and social services centre
- Info-Santé: 8-1-1
- Services Québec toll-free line: 1-877-644-4545
- Tel-jeunes: 1-800-263-2266
- Ligne Parents: 1-800-361-5085
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Québec Chapter: 514-849-3291

Internet

- Government of Québec pandemic website: www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca
- Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec: www.msss.gouv.qc.ca
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Québec Chapter: www.acsm-ca.qc.ca/questionnaires
- Tel-jeunes: www.teljeunes.com

Read the other psychosocial information sheets dealing with various topics related to influenza pandemics. They can be downloaded from the Government of Québec's pandemic website.

Text

Hélène Ouellet, research officer, Direction générale des services sociaux, Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec

Collaboration

Gaétan Trudeau, research officer, Direction générale des services sociaux, Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec

Sylvie Bessette, social worker, Maison Aube-Lumière, Sherbrooke (palliative care residence affiliated with the Université de Sherbrooke)

Josée Masson, professional social worker (private practice)

References

Beaumont, Céline. "Le deuil chez l'enfant: mieux le comprendre pour mieux l'accompagner." [Online]. 2002. www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/opqv2/File/pub_psychologie_quebec/novembre_2002/ArtDossier_Enfant_Nov02.pdf

Bessette, Sylvie, and Claire Foch. "Les enfants en deuil." [Online]. www.mamanpourlavie.com/fr/conseils/statique/conseils_34.html

Dolto, F. *Parler de la mort*. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

Hanus, M., and B. M. Sourkes. *Les enfants en deuil*. Paris: Frison-Roche, 1997.

Masson, Josée. *Derrière mes larmes d'enfant, la mort et le deuil me font mal*. Éditions Ressources, 2006.

Monbourquette, Jean. *Aimer, perdre et grandir, assumer les difficultés et les deuils de la vie*. Bayard Éditions/Le Centurion, 1995.

Ponette : l'histoire d'une petite fille qui refuse la mort de sa mère. [Video recording.] Jacques Doillon, France, 1995, DVD, 93 minutes, colour, 35 mm/1.66.

Checklist

If necessary, contact:
