



Supporting bereaved pre-school age children

Babies and toddlers

Babies and toddlers don't understand what death or dying means but they will have a sense of something missing if a main care-giver dies.

What you may see:

- Very young children do pick up on emotions - you are grieving too.
- Your baby may become very clingy or cry if you leave the room - a sign of feeling insecure.
- Your baby may cry a lot.
- You may find your baby has more difficulty in getting to sleep or feeding.

What babies and toddlers need:

- As much consistent care as possible.
- Maintaining routines.

2-5 year-olds

Children of this age do not have a real understanding of death - that the person cannot come back. This leads to repeated questioning of what has happened and it is important that the adults in the child's life answer in the same way.

What you may see:

- Your child may expect the return of the person who has died. It is entirely logical in a young child's mind to say "*my mummy has died but she will come back for my birthday.*" This doesn't mean you have done a poor job of telling your child what has happened - it is just that the child is trying to make sense of a new concept for them.
- Their behaviour may regress - starting to bed wet after they had been dry.
- If already at pre-school they may show separation anxiety.

What may help:

- Simple, direct language. it is important to avoid using euphemisms. Here are some examples of how a young child may interpret words from an adult that aim to 'soften' the fact that someone has died:

Adult's statement: "*It's really sad but we have lost your mum.*"

Child's response: "*Well why are we not looking for her?*"

Adult's statement: "*Daddy died in his sleep.*"

Child's behavioural response: "*I must stay awake because I don't want to die in my sleep... and I'm going to keep checking that mummy has not died in her sleep.*"

Adult's statement: "*Mummy has gone to a better place.*"

Child's response: "*I want to die so I can go and see mummy.*"

- Your child will need concrete language around what happens when someone has died. The need to know that the person who has died doesn't feel any pain or feel the cold, and doesn't need food or water. This language is especially important when talking with children about funerals.
- Your child may keep asking the same questions. They need to hear the information more than once to develop their understanding. It is important that other members of the family use the same language you have chosen so that your child doesn't get confused.
- You may find that some people feel that young children should be protected from death of that they are 'too young to know'. Our experience - and that of the families we have worked with - is that even very young children do best if they are included in what has happened.
- Pre-school children love storybooks and there are a number of very helpful books on our suggested reading list. These are books we recommend to families and pre-school staff that have been very helpful in helping young children develop an understanding of what death means.
 - [Pre-school age books – link to SeeSaw reading list.](#)
 - [Story books – link to SeeSaw reading list.](#)
- Keeping the same routines as far as possible will help young children appreciate that much of their life goes on as before.
- Children may not have the language to show how they are feeling but will express themselves through play and may act out events with toys. This is a way they try to make sense of what has happened. For example:

“Sanjay [age 4] didn't say much after his dad was killed in a road traffic accident but he started playing with his cars in a different way - crashing them into each other and running over toy figures. It helped to know that this was normal and not something I needed to worry about. He stopped playing like this after a couple of weeks.”