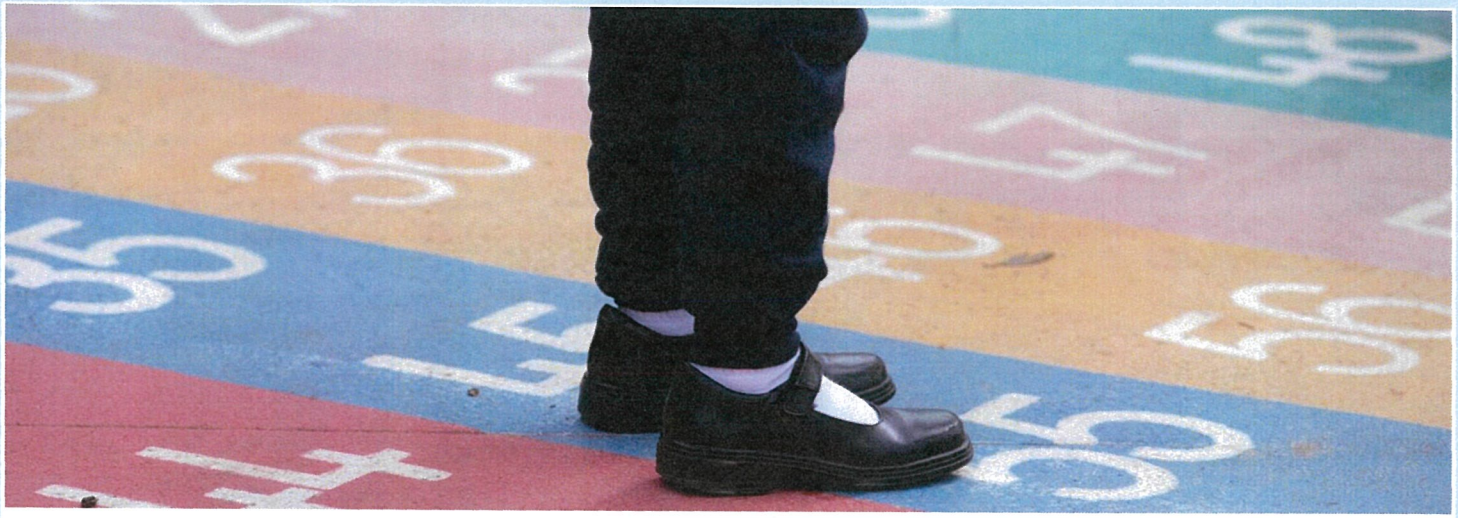

Grief

Grief is our natural response to loss. Children and young people experience grief when they lose someone or something they feel close to.

Grief is more intense when the loss is more significant

The death of a family member, friend or pet is particularly hard for children and young people.

Grief can also be experienced following events, including:

- separation of parents and family breakup
- change of learning community or shifting house
- loss of a friendship
- relocating to a new city or country
- disability or medical illness
- having a family member in hospital for a long time
- forced displacement (for example, due to natural disasters, war, loss of family's livelihood)
- loss of culture.

Grief affects children and young people in different ways depending on their age, developmental stage, the disruption to their lives and their family and the availability of support networks.

Grief can be experienced on an individual, family, community and intergenerational level. For example, in connected communities, a loss may impact on the wellbeing of many people. Unresolved grief can also be passed through generations. Sudden or unexpected loss can increase the intensity of grief.

Read more about providing support to children and young people affected by grief.

How does grief affect children and young people?

Grief can affect many parts of a child or young person's life, including their emotions, thoughts, behaviour and physical health.

They can feel their loss both at home and in the learning community. Grief can make it hard to concentrate, disrupt sleep patterns and cause physical health complaints such as headaches and nausea. While many children and young people experiencing grief may struggle to perform at their previous levels academically for a period of time, with support and structure most will recover from this temporary setback.

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What signs should I look out for?

Everyone experiences grief differently

Grief reactions commonly include sadness, crying, anxiety, having bad dreams and increased need to be close to their families. Children and young people show their distress in a range of ways. For example, they may be angry, irritable or unsettled, or lose motivation for learning or the things they love to do (such as sports practice or playing with friends).

It may be difficult for a child or young person to express their grief, or the grief may take some time to emerge after a loss. Children and young people will grieve differently depending on their stage of development. Expressions of grief are also influenced by their family's culture, established patterns of mourning and acceptable expression of emotions. Here are some typical signs you can look out for in children and adolescents:

Children

- Shock – at first, a child may express shock at their loss and not believe it's real.
- Regression – sometimes children show their distress by behaving in ways you'd expect from a younger child (for example, wetting the bed at night, sucking their thumb or using baby talk).
- Anger – children may become angry and have tantrums.
- Guilt – a child might feel that the loss was their fault.
- Anxiety – a child may be anxious about the safety of other loved ones, feel separation anxiety and become clingy.
- Physical symptoms – these can include stomach pains, headaches and other aches and pains.
- Sleep disturbances – difficulties falling asleep, staying asleep or having nightmares.
- Eating – children may lose their appetite.
- Concentration – it may be difficult to focus on schoolwork.
- Withdrawal – children may not want to play with their friends.

Adolescents

Adolescents have a greater capacity to understand the impact of their loss. They may express their grief in the same way as children, but other signs to look out for include:

- risk-taking behaviour
- resentment – they may act out and be angry about their loss
- acting cool, as though they're not affected by the loss
- frequent mood changes.

Adolescents will differ in how they want to grieve. Some want family and friend support, while others will want to deal with their emotions more privately. Loss during adolescence can sometimes place additional responsibility or burden on a young person, as they may feel, or be told, that they need to 'step up' with caring or financial roles. This can be very stressful, as an adolescent may be struggling with grief plus the extra burden and potentially loss of freedom. Guilt can also enter the picture, as they feel resentful (then guilty) about their new role.

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about observing children and young people's behavioural and mood changes in the Notice module.

References

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External links

Beyond Blue – Grief and loss

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network