

Supporting children and young people affected by grief

Children and young people can need lots of reassurance and support from caring adults to help them come to terms with a major loss.

How long does grief last?

Grief is a normal response to losing someone or something that matters to you and it can last a long time. This can be especially true if the child or young person loses a family member or if the loss occurs in traumatic circumstances. Everyone experiences grief in their own way and on their own timeline. A child or young person may seem to be coping today, but not so well tomorrow. Learn more about [what grief looks like in children and young people](#).

What can educators do to help?

Supporting people affected by grief can be challenging. Always remember to [look after yourself](#) and connect with support when needed. You can also consider whether you are best placed to have these conversations.

Knowing what to say and how to talk with children and young people about their loss and grief can be challenging. If you have concerns, here are some ideas about how you can support them.

Acknowledge what has happened

Let the child or young person know you care and acknowledge their loss. For example, you might say:

- "I was sad to hear that..."
- "Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you."
- "I am here for you if you would like to talk."

Even if the child or young person doesn't want to talk, knowing there's someone who's aware

of their situation and cares about them can be helpful.

Acknowledge feelings

Let them talk about their feelings if they're ready to do so. Ask them questions and offer your support. If they find it hard to explain how they feel, suggest some words (such as angry or sad) to start a conversation. Show an interest in other parts of their life too, so that their grief isn't the only thing you talk about.

Encourage children and young people to express their grief in ways that feel natural to them, whether through talking, writing, art, physical actions or other forms of expression.

Plan support

Talk to the child or young person about supports that are available. Ask them if they have any ideas about what might be helpful.

Discuss ways they can indicate that they're feeling overwhelmed and identify key people and places they can go, or resources they can use.

Some children and young people may need guidance from educators to access supports. This can be planned in collaboration with their families and your wellbeing team or senior staff.

Honour their loss

Help the child or young person honour their loss by doing something that's meaningful to them. They may want to write a diary or letter; make artwork; or write a song about their loss. Some might wish to collect personal possessions that will help them remember.

Provide learning support

Falling behind in the learning community can add extra stress to children and young people. It's important to help them catch up with their learning.

Learn about the impact of intergenerational trauma on First Nations Peoples

For some First Nations children and young people, experiences of grief can be compounded by [intergenerational trauma](#). This includes unresolved grief relating to things like the Stolen Generations and disconnection from culture and Country.

Educators can help support First Nations children and young people by recognising the role of intergenerational trauma in grief, creating welcoming and culturally respectful learning environments, and using resources such as [Reflect, Respect and Respond](#) to help guide their practices.

Maintain routines

Loss can cause big changes in a child or young person's life. Keeping up normal routines, as much as possible reduces the number of changes and can help them feel more secure.

Provide mental health and wellbeing awareness and education activities

Promote help-seeking and discuss mental health and wellbeing with children and young people. Encourage actions they can take to look after themselves such as:

- staying active
- eating well
- connecting with friends, family and the community
- getting enough sleep
- limiting alcohol and other drugs.

For some children and young people this might include connecting to country, to culture and other things that are important to their beliefs and values.

Offer additional help when needed

Grief may be more intense at particular times of the year such as anniversaries, significant cultural dates, birthdays and holidays. It may be

helpful to speak with the child or young person's family, so you're aware of upcoming events or times that may be particularly difficult. Extra support at these important times can be helpful.

Talk with leadership or wellbeing staff

It can be hard to tell if a child or young person isn't coping. Signs they may need additional support include:

- withdrawal or isolation from peers and usual activities
- sudden changes in behaviour
- difficulty concentrating or drops in academic performance
- changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- physical complaints (with no clear cause – stomach aches).

If a child or young person's behaviour changes and is persistent, this could be a sign they need extra help. It's important to seek the support of your wellbeing staff.

You can use the [BETLS Observational Tool](#) to help you gather and document information and observations about a child or young person and your concerns.

Access external support where necessary

Some children and young people may need support from an [external mental health professional](#) to help them deal with their loss and grief. While most will feel better over time, some children and young people may experience mental health issues such as [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If an individual doesn't seem to be recovering or is getting worse over time, it's important to seek additional supports. Talk with your wellbeing staff, the family and the young person to work out next steps.

Be You Resources

Learn more about [Recommending additional support](#).

External links

Trauma Grief Network – [Grief and loss](#).

