

this will help them overlook some of your more inconsistent behaviour.

## Helping a Child who is Grieving

### Use Simple Language

When discussing the death of a loved one, avoid making abstract Use "direct, age-appropriate language. You might say something like "I have something very sad to tell you. Grandma has died. She's not alive anymore and we won't be able to see her and play with her." Then sit quietly and listen to the child

### Offer a Listening Ear

Children's concerns are often different than you might expect from worrying the deceased will get hungry underground to wondering who will throw the birthday parties. "Their questions aren't necessarily what your questions are," "You may be thinking about how to explain cancer while they're wondering if there will be holes in the box for breathing." A child may also continue to wonder when Grandpa's coming over.

"Gently and lovingly say, 'Grandpa has died and though we wish he can come over, he can't.' They might pose other questions, like 'Where is he?' and you can then teach what you believe," "Children are naturally curious. We have to be very patient, available, and responsive when they ask questions."

Encourage questions but don't worry about having all the answers; what's more important is being available and responding in ways that show you care. Emphasize that your children are not alone in their feelings of helplessness and bewilderment, and that you will grieve together and support each other as a family.

## Contact Us

### Head Office:

111 Velchman Street, Dubbo, NSW 2830  
(PO Box 379)

**Phone:** 02 6882 9222

**Fax:** 02 6884 9100

**Email:** [info@nalag.org.au](mailto:info@nalag.org.au)

**Web:** [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

### Telephone Grief Support Line

**Call 02 9489 6644\*** (\*Call costs will apply)

### NALAG Centres & Branches (NSW)

#### NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief DUBBO

(Same as Head Office)

#### NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief MUDGEE

107 Mortimer Street Mudgee, NSW 2850

**Phone:** 0488 225 710

**Email:** [mudgee@nalag.org.au](mailto:mudgee@nalag.org.au)

#### NALAG Bellingen/Nambucca Shires

##### MIINDALA Branch

**Mobile:** 0448 084 792

**Email:** [miindala2013@gmail.com](mailto:miindala2013@gmail.com)

#### NALAG Broken Bay

**Phone:** 02 4321 1111

**Acronym:** 01 HJAGGCF

**Email:** [bb@nalag.org.au](mailto:bb@nalag.org.au)

#### NALAG BGK NSW

**www.nalag.org.au**

**contact@nalag.org.au**

# Explaining Death to Children

## Children - Loss & Grief

It is difficult enough for adults to deal with the loss and grief, be it death, miscarriage, separation or divorce. We at least know what death, separation, and divorce is and have our beliefs as to what follows and our knowledge as to what causes it. Children, particularly younger ones, don't have this understanding. They must try to understand the facts of the situation and the reactions of those around them while having a very limited understanding of the consequences.

Children grieve too. They need the same understanding and compassion as given to parents. Unfortunately they are often overlooked by others and even sent away to be "entertained" after a loss has occurred. To deal with the loss children need security, the reassurance of their relationship with their parents or significant adult and clear explanations that suit their age and comprehension level.

If your child's behaviour changes from what you are used to, you may need to consider that they need some assistance in dealing with the loss and its consequences. Behaviour changes may include:

- Withdrawal from parents, friends, and teachers.
- Fighting, hitting, irritability, argumentativeness,
- moodiness, temper tantrums.
- Whingeing/whining.
- Refusal to go to school, preschool, kindy or daycare.
- Fear at being separated from parents.
- Going back to doing things you thought they had outgrown.
- Bedwetting.
- Sleep disturbances, "bad dreams".
- Appetite changes.
- Refusal to talk/baby talk.

- Becoming fearful of many things. Eg monsters.
- Loss of interest in things/loss of concentration.

### Explaining Death to Children

Explaining death to children is a very difficult, very personal and very private thing. You, as parents or family know your children the best and what will be the most effective way to help them cope with the situation. Choose the time and place that feels right for you and the child preferably so that you will not feel rushed or embarrassed. There are a few things to remember when explaining death.

Make sure your explanation is clear and tailored to suit the child's age, understanding of death and his/her need for detail.

Use the words "death" or "dead" rather than words like "lost" or "asleep" which can lead to children developing fears of ordinary events.

Take your time to explain. Speak slowly and let the child take in what you have said. Pause at times to gauge the child's reactions. Let children share pictures and other mementos.

Be guided by the children's reactions and questions. Children's play and drawings may also give you some indication of what they understand about what has happened.

Be prepared to repeat your explanations and give more detail if and as often as the child needs it. Their questions and the need to have the story retold can arise, hours, days, weeks, even years later as the child thinks about the death and develops intellectually and emotionally.

Constantly check what the child has understood about what death is, what has happened and what caused the death. Children often misinterpret what has been said or take things said out of context. Asking them questions about what they know about the loss and the situation can help you check their

understanding and correct any misconceptions.

Before explaining the death to children, be sure of what you believe has happened and what will happen now. Tell children what you honestly believe as misunderstandings will be less likely to occur. If the family has no religious beliefs, now is not the time to introduce the concepts of heaven and an afterlife. Children will need more explanation in such cases.

### Be Honest

Tell the truth. Hiding information can cause kids to feel mistrust, and reluctant to turn to adults for support. When you don't tell the truth it makes feelings and information go underground, which is never good. Children also get crazy ideas because they have to make up information to fill in the blanks.

Remember that if you feel you have made a mistake in explaining the death to a child, this can be corrected through honest discussion with him or her.

### Parenting under difficult circumstances

As parents who have experienced death you may have enough difficulty coping with your own emotions. It is often difficult to also cope with the grief of your children as well as their ordinary everyday demands. This is particularly true if your children's grief shows itself in behaviour that is new and difficult to cope with.

It is not surprising that at times you may become short tempered with, or withdrawn from your children. Later you may feel guilty for not being there for your children at such a difficult time for them.

Be gentle with yourself. Accept that this is grief and forgive yourself. Above all, be honest with your children. If you have yelled or smacked unfairly, admit your mistake and say you're sorry. Explain to them your feelings. You'd be surprised what children can understand and how accepting they can be. Above all, let them know you love them because knowing