

## Grief and children

This document provides important information about the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU) counselling services, including information about confidentiality, storage of client information and complaints procedures. If you have any questions, please contact FFMPU. Please note that in this document the term 'family' is used to refer to anyone who has a significant relationship with the person who is missing.

### Children and loss

Growing up involves dealing with change, losses and gains, and the challenge for the child and carer(s) is how these are dealt with.

For children these losses may include:

- losing a family member or friend
- losing a pet
- starting childcare, school, changing classes and teachers, moving house
- separation or divorce of parents.

The support children receive, how early losses are dealt with, the conversations that happen in families, and what children observe are all important in determining how children deal with the losses they may experience.

Children grieve individually and in ways different to adults.

- Their grief can appear to be less direct than that of an adult.
- Their grief may be expressed in ways that may not appear to be directly related to a loss. Their behaviour may be challenging, demanding and difficult as they struggle to find out and understand what's happening. They may be looking for reassurance, closeness, comfort and support.
- Children move in and out of grief. They will seem fine one day and another day they may not seem to be managing so well.
- They may behave in ways that are 'out of character' – they may be clingy or distant, quiet or noisy, attention seeking or withdrawn.

Important factors which impact on their behaviour and expression of grief are:

- age
- emotional maturity
- the connection to the person or the circumstances of the loss.

### Children and ambiguous loss

Children can experience ambiguous losses that may not be recognised in the same way a clear loss, such as a death, is recognised. These may include:

- when a parent, sibling, other family member or someone they care about goes missing
- when parents separate or a family unit breaks up
- loss of a friendship
- having a disability or illness, especially a chronic illness
- loss of momentos and belongings due to natural or manmade disaster
- loss of a sense of safety and security
- moving house or changing schools
- long periods of separation from a parent
- being in hospital.

### How children show their grief

Young children don't have the words to talk about their feelings in the way that adults do. They may not be able to describe what they're feeling.

Children may show their distress and grief through somatic symptoms and behavioural changes, including:

- physical pain such as stomach aches or headaches
- sleep disturbance, nightmares
- loss of appetite or overeating
- being destructive – breaking toys or other objects
- regressing – acting like a younger child
- pseudo-mature behaviour
- aggressive, angry play or repetitive play

- directing anger at parents and friends
- difficulty concentrating
- problems with school work
- being emotionally labile
- being mean to others
- 'switching off', acting as if they haven't taken in what has happened
- being fearful or timid
- temper tantrums
- blaming themselves and turning their anger inwards
- being clingy, wanting to be near adults, separation anxiety
- running away, avoiding school, stealing.

Times of loss are stressful for children because:

- The adults who love them may not be as emotionally or physically available to support them, if the adults are very upset themselves.
- There are strange situations to cope with that are outside of the normal routine of life and the usual routine is disrupted.
- People around them may behave differently, looking sad, crying, not able to pay as much attention to what is happening for the child.
- They are not sure what to think or how to behave.
- When a loss occurs, the child may fear that it will happen to someone else.

## How children understand loss

### Preschool children

In the pre-school years children do not understand that death is forever/permanent. They feel grief when they lose someone close to them. It is likely that they don't really understand what is happening. They don't understand what is real and what is not real, and they may believe that their own wishes or behaviour caused the person to go away. A loss at this life stage is a major stress that takes time and care to overcome. In a way it is like losing a part of themselves.

For young children without the language to verbalise their emotions they may show them in the way they act, that is "act out" They may appear clingy, needing closeness or reassurance, or demonstrate separation anxiety.

### Early years of school

Children are beginning to understand that some losses, including death are permanent. They begin to realise there is no coming back when someone has died. They may need to hear what has happened many times over. Some children feel responsible for death, separation or someone going missing and think it was as a result of their behaviour or actions, for example, they were naughty. They may also be worried about who will look after them, for example, if they have lost a parent they may worry about losing the other parent as well.

They may speak in a matter-of-fact way about what has happened and ask many questions. They may not understand their feelings or be able to find the words to describe them. They may demonstrate these feelings through their behaviour, especially through play and their interactions with other children.

### Later primary school years

Children understand that death is permanent.

They can also understand why death happens, for example, illness, accident or old age. Like adults they will continue to search for meaning and answers to why someone has gone, either through missing or death. They can talk about their feelings better although they might not always do so.

They are less likely to blame themselves for what has happened but they might blame others, for example, blame a parent for a divorce or a family member going missing.

Their sense of right and wrong is quite strong and they may hold strong views about what has happened or why it has happened. They may ask confronting questions about spiritual issues, the ways people die, and what happens afterwards.

They are more able to empathise with others who are experiencing a loss.

### The adolescent years

Adolescents experience loss and express their grief in ways similar to adults. Other developmental issues can complicate this expression and the challenges adolescence brings. They experience emotional 'ups and downs' and mood swings, which can intensify their distress. They may become more moody, withdrawn and at times depressed. If they are connected with their peer group they may

choose to spend time with friends more than family, whilst needing reassurance that adults are available should they wish to talk.

They may act out with anger, masking underlying feelings of distress. Risk-taking behaviour involving alcohol and other drugs, driving too fast or doing dangerous things may occur or increase. Some may express their emotions through increased physical activity, dancing and loud music. Others may be more introspective – listening to music, writing poetry or just being in a quiet place.

Whichever they choose they need to know support is available and freely given.

### How adults can help

- Acknowledge the event that has occurred and the painful emotions that come with it. Do not gloss over or attempt to distract from what has happened.
- Allow a child to express his/her emotions. Tears, fear, anger, confusion, sadness and protest are all understandable and normal responses to loss.
- Allow a child to discuss a problem he/she is facing before it feels out of control or too overwhelming to manage.
- Keep the conversation and the words used simple and non-judgmental.
- Encourage a child to discuss his/her fears and emotions and listen carefully for verbal and nonverbal cues about the child's understanding.
- Allow a child to question, doubt, and have an opinion of their own, which might be different. Respect the fact that your child is an individual with a unique personality, and will deal with loss in his/her own way.
- He/she needs the freedom to search for his/her own meaning in a secure and loving environment.
- If you feel unable to answer a child's questions, let him/her know that there are people who are trained and able to do just this.

### Contact details

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

**Phone** (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • **National Relay Service** 1800 555 677

**Facebook** [www.facebook.com/missing.501](https://www.facebook.com/missing.501) • **Email** [ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au](mailto:ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au)

[www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au)

- Let your child know that asking for help and support is a sign of courage, not weakness.
- Be honest and direct with how you communicate the loss, bearing in mind the need for sensitivity with regard to the language used.
- Be mindful of the delicate balance of giving enough information versus too much information.

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(FMP • 02/2016)