

Key points about how to support children with grief.

Waiho i te toipoto, kaua i te toitoa. Let us keep close together not far apart.

The information has come from www.kidshealth.org.nz

- Tamariki and rangatahi (young people) grieve just as much as adults but may show it in different ways
- Tamariki have less ability to put into words how they are feeling
- Sometimes tamariki may not seem to be directly affected by a death, but you can often see their distress in their behaviour rather than in what they are able to say
- This is a time for lots of hugs and also clear explanations of why their loved one died, in a way that is right for your child's age

What helps Rangatahi (teenagers) who are grieving:

Be honest, patient and communicate clearly

Be honest about what has happened. Talk to your child in a way that is right for their age. This will help your child make sense of things and help to reduce anxiety and confusion. Take the time necessary.

Discussion and communication will help the child understand and integrate the bereavement. Follow the child's lead. Answer questions honestly and ask the child what they are thinking and feeling.

Talk about feelings

Talk about feelings and help your child to identify what they are feeling. Your child may be experiencing strong feelings of sadness, anxiety and anger over their loss. Help them to make sense of these feelings by putting words to them.

Keep routines going

Keep to routines as much as possible. Routines will help the child feel secure and reassured that their world continues to make sense.

Understand that grief feelings depend on the relationship with the person who has died

It's important to understand that the stronger the relationship is with the loved one, the more intense the grief feelings may be in times of loss.

Stay calm and show warmth

If possible, when a child 'acts out', remember that they may be overwhelmed by feelings. Stay calm and respond to the child with warmth and empathy.

Acknowledge the child's feelings

If the child becomes overwhelmed with their feelings, it's helpful to acknowledge the way they are feeling. Distraction can also help - "let's go for a walk" or "let's play a game".

Remember that how we grieve is unique

Grief is sometimes described as an emotional fingerprint - it is unique to each of us. There is no normal way to grieve. It is a turbulent time that can effect us physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. The main thing to remember when supporting tamariki and rangatahi with their grief is to reassure them you are there to look after them and to help keep them safe.

Some ways to offer reassurance:

- listening
- inviting rituals into the whānau as you mourn
- offering choices around grieving ("what way would you like to remember?")
- promoting outlets where feelings can be expressed, such as creative writing, art, sport, dance and play

"Sharing your own grief can help tamariki understand they are not alone. They may be reassured about their own big feelings. You will also be modelling healthy expression."

Provide a listening ear

A listening ear and your calm presence can be deeply reassuring.

Ask open questions

What are you thinking about at the moment?

How are you feeling?

Validate feelings and thoughts

I see that you are very sad right now.

Answer questions

Answer questions truthfully and at the developmental stage that is appropriate.

Affirm family and personal strengths

What can we do together that may help us through this time?

How a child's developmental stage affects how they show grief

Children and teenagers may show their grief in different ways than adults

Children grieve just as much as adults but may show it in different ways. The death of a whānau member can have a deep effect on tamariki. Children have less of an ability to put into words how they are feeling.

Sometimes children may not seem to be directly affected by a death, but you can often see their distress in their behaviour rather than what they are able to say. They may become more emotional and clingy. They may develop worries and fear that someone else in the whānau may die. Be understanding that changes in behaviour may be an expression of grief. This is a time for lots of hugs and clear, age appropriate explanations of why their loved one died.

Age and stage matters

Child development is very individual and falls along a continuum depending on your child's age, personality, culture, environment and life experience. Children may have experienced previous losses, including the death of pets. How parents respond to these events helps guide children in how they address their own grief. How a child experiences a bereavement will also be impacted by these individual factors and by their relationship with the person who has died.

Teenagers may at times appear to be unconcerned, unaffected or unaware of a death as they continue to play or carry on with their day. A fundamental difference between the way adults and teenagers grieve is that teenagers are not able to hold intense emotion for long periods of time. They tend to grieve in bursts.

Children need ongoing support after bereavement. It is not unusual for grief to resurface later, when a child matures and goes through another developmental stage.

How teenagers (13+ years) grieve

Rangatahi understand that death is part of life.

Developmentally, they are in a time of big physical and emotional changes and may flip back and forth between younger age group type reactions and more adult reactions. Grief can have an impact on the developmental task of moving from dependence to independence, where young people move from whānau ties to increasing reliance on their peers.

It can be difficult to ask for support while asserting independence.

Rangatahi may want to be with friends more than whānau for support. In some instances, rangatahi will gravitate to their online gaming community for support and connectedness. This behaviour is a normal reaction! Having meal times at the family table may give you opportunities to 'check in' with your grieving child.

Keep in mind they may find the intensity of emotion overwhelming and may not be able to express what they are feeling.

Rangatahi don't like to feel different and a bereaved teenager may feel socially isolated. They may want to feel and look as though they are coping while trying to manage or deny difficult internal emotions and feelings. To escape this level of discomfort some rangatahi may use risk taking behaviour.

Common reactions

- difficulty concentrating, being easily distracted
- withdrawal, needing more personal space
- taking on adult responsibilities and become 'the carer' for those around them
- 'act out'
- isolation
- trying hard to please
- being overwhelmed by intense reactions such as guilt, anger or fear
- having difficulty expressing their emotions
- fearing for their own and others' safety
- having questions about mortality, death, dying and spirituality
- using jokes and humour to mask their feelings
- feeling embarrassed, hiding or minimising their loss
- wanting to be close to friends and whānau
- having physical symptoms (such as feeling sick, headaches, stomach aches)
- dreaming about or sensing the presence of the person who has died
- getting into trouble, being defiant, irritable
- eating or sleeping more or less than usual
- risk taking behaviour to escape, find comfort or to prove they are alive and strong
- temporary regressing (for example, losing self-confidence, bed wetting)
- having strained relationships
- having a change in self-image, lower self-esteem, confidence
- sadness may move to depression
- may have suicidal thoughts

Ways to support

- include them, be honest about what is happening
- talk about the death together
- be willing to listen and give regular opportunities to be available to answer questions
- acknowledge and share your feelings and let your teenager know that you understand it is hard for them
- if they don't want to talk to you, leave helpful information around the house
- talk about grief, what is normal and how everyone grieves differently
- ask for support from extended whānau, friends, teachers, health professionals - ask other adults to be available and check in with your teenager
- keep routines, where possible
- avoid expectations of adult behaviour
- praise and encourage them
- seek professional help if you are concerned

What bereaved children and teenagers need

Bereaved tamariki and rangatahi will need ongoing attention, reassurance and support. It is not unusual for grief to resurface later on, even well after the death. This can happen as they move through different life milestones, and develop as individuals.

It's important to remember that grief takes as long as it takes. Navigating through grief is not only a personal process but a family one as well. Create meaningful events and anniversaries with your whānau that will help tamariki continue to process and make sense of their loss as they continue to grow.