

Grief in young children

*Information and guidance for parents
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1. What is grief?

Children can experience many kinds of loss. They can lose their mother, father, sister or brother through death, or they can lose daily contact with one or several loved ones through divorce, being placed in a foster home or through adoption. The most common loss children experience, however, is when their grandmother or grandfather dies. This can be extremely painful because they have often played an important part in the child's everyday life. But children can also experience loss when a friend becomes ill or dies, when they themselves or someone they care about moves far away, or when a pet dies. All these losses can trigger grief in children. Some children are taken away from parents who are unable to take care of them. Others have an illness or injury that means they have to amputate or lose the use of a limb, with the sense of loss and grief this can cause.

We do not need to go back many years to the time when it was doubted that children were able to grieve. Particularly questionable was whether young children could grieve. Fortunately this now belongs to the past, and we are now asking ourselves how children grieve and how parents can understand children's grief. This book is primarily dealing with children's grief after someone they care about has died. Many of the reactions described and the measures suggested will, all the same, also be useful if the child's grief has been triggered by other losses.

What understanding do young children have of death?

The term «young children» covers the age range from birth to school-starting age. The way death is understood will vary enormously from tiny babies to children who are ready to start school. In order to understand death, a child must have developed concepts which enable him to grasp what has happened when someone has died. Children between the ages of two and two and a half have only a slight understanding of what death is, and children under two are too young to be able to grasp this at all. Young children seldom understand death in the way an adult does, but as they approach school-starting age, they begin to be able to understand more of what has happened.

Children find it difficult to understand that death is universal. They will have to understand that all life must die at one time or another, including themselves. They will also have to understand that death is final, that the dead person cannot come back. The child has to understand that all bodily functions cease, which means that the dead person can no longer breathe, eat, go out and play, and that he or she cannot think, feel or dream. The child also has to understand the reasons why we die. They have to learn to differentiate between «magic» causes, like someone wishing that someone would die and

then they do, and the real causes of death. The child will gradually come to understand that death is not only caused by external circumstances, like being shot, for example, but it can also be caused by illness or old age. The pre-school age child finds it easier to imagine death being caused by accidents or weapons rather than old age or illness. In a similar way, the loss experienced through divorce is connected more to quarrels and conflicts than the parent's discontent with their relationship as a couple.

Many young children show through their questions and comments that they have not developed a deeper understanding of what death is:

.....
«Daddy's coming back after the summer holiday, isn't he?»
«Mummy's been away for so long. When's she coming back?»
.....

It is easy to think that this is just a matter of children not having the capacity to understand, and we forget that a child will seldom have lived long enough to have gained her own experiences with death which enable her to develop insight into it.

As the child has a concrete understanding of what has happened, he may demand to be taken to visit the dead person at the place they are at now, or he may insist that the dead person will come back in a similar way to his experience of someone going to work or being away for a few days. Children find it difficult to understand that death is final. They are used to things being repeated, that they get up each morning, go to kindergarten, come home and the next day it all happens again. Everything happens again, so why shouldn't the person who has gone, come back again? Their perception of time only gradually becomes more like an adult's, with a line running from the past, through the present and into the future. The understanding of a very young child (under three years of age) becomes apparent in simple statements which confirm that what the child experiences is the absence of someone who is normally present in her daily life: «Daddy dead, Daddy gone. Daddy dead, Daddy gone. Mummy's here.» Gradually, as the child realises that the dead person is not coming back, she will understand that death is final.

The child's lack of understanding of the fact that all the bodily functions have ceased, is shown through questions like:

.....
«Who will give him food down in his grave?»
«Who will cut Gretel's hair now?»
.....

Some children have only heard of death taking place in a violent way, whether they have seen this on TV or heard about it from friends at kindergarten, and their understanding of the cause of death is along these lines. «Who shot him?» may be the question asked by a five year old when his friend tells him that his grandfather has died.

Children under two years of age are able to notice the absence of someone who has usually been there, and can go to bed, point and say «Ba» or «Mamma» or point at a picture and say «her?». A three year old

can sometimes formulate questions and comments which show that they have a more highly developed understanding of death than the adult realises:

Lisa was sitting with her playmate (both aged between three and four) and they were talking about how unfair it is that some young people die before they are old.

A four year old who is given proper information and the opportunity to ask questions can understand a good deal of the implications of death:

Stian lost his best friend in an accident. He didn't understand what had happened and kept asking when his friend was coming back. After he had been at the wake and had seen his friend in the coffin, he sat in the car and said: «Now we'll never be able to play in the sand pit any more. Now we can't play on the swings any more.»

This concrete meeting with death meant that the child was able to take a big leap forwards in his understanding of what death is, and he was able to formulate this in his own words.

During the course of the pre-school years and particularly during the first years of school, children gradually understand that death is irrevocable and that all the bodily functions cease. After a while they also understand that death is unavoidable and everyone, including themselves, will die one day. Children who have lost someone who has been dear to them, have a greater understanding of the different aspects of death than their peers, who have not experienced a loss of this kind. Occasionally personal experiences can cause anxiety which is an obstacle to understanding, as a good deal of the child's mental capacity is «locked up» in watching out for new dangers.

Children of pre-school age gain a broader understanding of death through the concrete facts they pick up from the information they are given by parents and other adults, for example by looking at photograph albums or video films, or by going to visit the grave itself. A child who experiences a loss at the age of three may have a different understanding of this loss when she has become six and a half. She may then go back to what happened with questions and comments which show that she has greater insight into what has happened, and can seek out information which can help her understand better the events that took place when she was younger.

It is important for adults to listen actively to the child so that they can understand the child's understanding of death, ask careful questions which help to reveal what the child may not understand, and to be sensitive to the themes that may be behind the child's questions.

Many people do not talk to pre-school children about divorce, thinking that they do not react much to it. If the child continues living in the same home, it may be difficult for him to realise and

understand the changes he notices, and he may become slightly confused. The explanation that his parents are no longer going to live together, and a clear message about how visits to the parent who is no longer living with him will take place, prevent confusion.

How do young children react to loss?

Immediate reactions

The range of children's reactions is very great. When they hear that someone has died or their parents are going to get divorced, reactions can vary from no reaction at all to strong emotional outbursts. Some protest loudly; they shout and cry and want to strike out in anger against the parent who is relating what has happened. Others seem not to have taken in what has been said, and the parents start telling them again because they think the child has not heard what was said. It is not unusual for pre-school aged children to not react, but many parents find this surprising. Straight after having been told what has happened, the child may ask if she can go out to play. This kind of reaction may be a sign that the child is pushing thoughts about what has happened to one side, so that she can take them in a little at a time. But this may also reflect the fact that young children are seldom able to grasp the long-term consequences of what has happened until they gradually come to understand that the person who has gone is not coming back.

If parents are going to get divorced, young children can be given the chance to see the house Mummy or Daddy is going to live in. Information, visits and explanations about the concrete changes separation or divorce bring about, help to calm the child's thoughts. Some children will be so shocked by the news that someone they love is dead or dying, or that they are going to move, that they are unable to speak and remain sitting in apathy, unable to react. Some pre-school children, who have been present when their mother or father died or was killed, have stayed sitting by the bed or at the scene of the killing for a long time, doing nothing, sometimes remaining silent for many days afterwards. When the message the child receives does not bring about an immediate alteration in the child's everyday life, for example if one of his parents has been diagnosed as having a fatal disease, or his parents are going to get divorced, the child may not show any particular reaction until he notices things changing in the home, like Mummy not being there any more or not being able to do as much as before.

So, immediate reactions can vary from protest to crying, anger or apathy. Adults are acting wisely if they refrain from pressing the child to react in a particular way and instead accept and confirm the child's reaction: «I can understand that you are angry. It's awful that this has happened. Mummy's also cross, but she's also very sad that your little sister is dead.»

Common secondary reactions

We can divide secondary reactions into those which present themselves in the first days and weeks after a death, and those which may extend over months and years. The reactions described here are normal reactions to death. Many, but by no means all, children have one or several of these reactions, and there is great variation in their type, intensity and duration. As many children only gradually realise what has happened, through the absence of the person they have lost, it is perhaps the most normal for there to be an absence of reaction first of all. The youngest children need repetition of the fact that the dead person has gone and will not come back again. In this way, they come to understand that the loss is real. However, other common reactions are:

- anxiety and fear
- sleep disturbances
- anger and attention demanding behaviour
- withdrawal and isolation
- sadness, longing and loss
- guilt and self-condemnation
- play connected to what has happened
- more childish behaviour
- distressing reliving of events and disturbing fantasies
- thoughts about meaning



Anxiety and fear

Young children show that they are afraid by constantly demanding the presence of their parents or the surviving parent:

«Stian became almost desperate when he couldn't see us. He insisted on having the door to the landing open at night, he always wanted the light to be on and he kept calling out to reassure himself that we were there.»

This example is fairly typical. Young children show their fear in their need to be near their parents as well as a great need for physical closeness with their parents, which some parents find clinging. The very youngest children are less eager to wander away from their parents when they are exploring their surroundings, and they are quick to crawl back to their mother or father if something unexpected happens. They may also cling to teddy bears, comforters etc., which

make them feel secure, and they clearly become more nervous, complaining, clinging or they have tantrums. Six to seven year olds can express verbally that they are afraid something is going to happen to their parents, but they may also be afraid that something is going to happen to themselves. This is also true for a number of younger children:

Vedgard was three years old when his younger sister died suddenly, less than twenty four hours after his mother brought her home from hospital. After this he did not want to be near his mother, and he only let his father take care of him. He thought it was his mother's fault that his sister had died, since the last he saw of his sister was his mother hurrying out of the house with her. His fear that she would also go off with him and he would never be able to come back, was tremendous, and it was only after sensitive help on the part of the hospital, where the boy was told how important it was that his mother had brought his sister to hospital, that his fear began to lessen.

If it is a friend of the child who dies, the child will realise that she herself can die, and she may become afraid of illness or accidents. Children are usually more afraid of losing their parents than that something may happen to them themselves. If the question «Can I die too?» arises, the child needs to be given both explanations of death and reassurances of her own safety. It is not unusual for a parent's death to trigger fear in a child about what will happen to her:

*«Who will buy food for me now?»
«Who will look after me if you die, Daddy?»*

This existential fear can be met with a description of what is going to change and what will remain the same:

«Even though Daddy is dead, we will still go on living here. Mummy will fetch you in kindergarten each day and organise the food. Mummy will come a bit later to the kindergarten to fetch you, because she has to finish work first. She'll come just after the fruit break.»

Children need information, reassurances, understanding of their reactions and needs, and the sense of security that life will continue more or less as before.

Sleep disturbances

Young children frequently react with sleep disturbances after a loss. They do not want to go to bed, and once they have gone to bed, they are very restless so that it can take a long time before they fall asleep. The need to have the light on and the door open are indications of the anxiety which often keeps them awake, because thoughts and fantasies enter into the conscious mind when there is nobody else there and they are not taking part in activities and play. They may also wake up

more often at night and call out, cry, moan or talk in their sleep, probably as a result of bad dreams or nightmares. Unfortunately, some parents still use sleep as a way of explaining death: «She's gone to sleep and won't wake up again.» Explanations like this make young children frightened to go to sleep themselves, and they also watch carefully over their parents taking a nap on the sofa or going to sleep in bed. Children create concrete and terrifying fantasies on the background of their parents' simple paraphrasing or images of death.

Anger and attention demanding behaviour

A child can feel explosive anger when someone they love is no longer there. These are confusing and overwhelming feelings for a young child, and his reactions may make him feel desperate, especially if he is coming up to school-starting age. Children commonly direct their anger to their parents or other people close to them, but they are seldom able to express it with such verbal clarity as this five-year old: «It's your fault. If you hadn't gone to the hospital with the baby, she wouldn't have died.» He kept hitting his mother as he said this. Children often become more difficult to deal with at kindergarten, as their anger affects other children. Sensitive and understanding adults who allow the child to react, but help him to find ways of expressing his feelings without hurting other people, are an enormous help in this kind of situation.

Sometimes the anger may be directed to siblings, which may be very worrying for parents:

A five-year old who had lost his father, started hitting his new born sister, and his mother was getting worried. The boy could not bear all the attention the baby was getting, especially as the father, who had looked after him while his mother took care of the baby, was no longer there. By behaving like this, he was able to draw his mother's attention to him. She arranged to get help with the baby, so that she could spend more time with the little boy.

Withdrawal and isolation

Some young children withdraw from other children in the aftermath of a loss, and they spend more time alone in the kindergarten or their home environment. These reactions are perhaps more usual in older children, but they can also be found in young children. In some cases this may be due to differences in their parents' mood and the kind of attention they get from them, which results in the children not being stimulated in the same way as before the loss.

If this kind of reaction becomes apparent, adults should be aware that the child may be struggling with thoughts and feelings which she needs help from an adult to express. Parents can help to counteract isolation by actively involving the child in relationships with other children.

Sadness, longing and loss

It is unusual for young children to show their grief by crying. They have less tolerance for strong feelings than adults, and they will therefore try to keep what has happened at a distance. Children have a shorter span of sadness than adults and will not usually be sad for long periods of time. This does not mean that they do not continue to think about the person who has passed away for a long time, or that they do not miss and long for him or her. They may fantasise about where the lost person is now that real life no longer allows them to be together. This short span of sadness may lead adults to believe that children do not grieve as much and as deeply as they in fact do.

Children build bridges over their sense of loss by seeking out places where they have been together with the dead person, or they seek out situations and things they associate with the dead person. They may also find closeness and build bridges over their sense of loss by smelling the dead person's clothes, looking at pictures, videos or things they have been given by the person who has passed away. But children also protect themselves by denying what has happened, either in their imagination or through their actions: «Let's go and visit my little brother in hospital» or «Is that you on the 'phone, Mummy?»

The oldest pre-school children can sometimes have experiences of the dead person being in the same room as them, although this reaction is more common in older children.

Guilt and self-condemnation

Young children can easily think that things that happen are a result of their own thoughts or actions. This concept of magical thinking means that they take an irrational responsibility for things that happen:

Helen was seven years old when her mother suddenly died. In a conversation almost four years later, she was asked whether she remembered the circumstances around what had happened. She answered: «Yes, I remember it well, and I remember I thought it was my fault because I hadn't tidied my room.»

Self-condemnation should particularly be looked out for in the case of a sibling dying, as jealousy between siblings is fairly common. Feelings of guilt may also represent real guilt, for example when a child had a part to play in what happened, like a car accident that took place because the child was disturbing the driver, or a six-year old who persuades his four-year old brother out onto the ice and the four-year old drowns.

Play connected to what has happened

Young children often express thoughts about and reactions to what has happened through play. In play, they are able to make a connection between the past and the present and they tussle with what has happened in order to understand it better. They are also able to express

different feelings through play. They may pretend that they die at home and in the kindergarten, or they may play funerals and rising up from the dead.

A seven-year old boy buried a bee in a matchbox next to his sister's grave and made it clear to his parents that it was not to be dug up again. After a few months, he dug it up again to see what had happened.

This boy wanted to find out and to understand what happens when we are dead. It may seem to adults that the games are repeated without much variation, but just as the child's questions about death are often repeated with slight variations, games can also have small variations which increase the child's insight.

Through play, the child can repeat, explore and test out what has happened, understand particularly difficult moments, express the desire to be able to do something to help, etc.. They may do this in the kindergarten or at home, for example playing with cars that crash after they have experienced a car accident.

Following a plane crash in which a pre-school teacher was killed, the parents related at a parents' meeting that their children were acting out the accident at home. Plane crashes and funerals were a part of their play for a while and enabled a processing of the events. Remarkably enough, the children did not play these games in the kindergarten until the staff themselves had processed the event and were able to «accept» this form of play.

It is not unusual for young children to add small ritual ceremonies which help them to express their feelings. They draw other children into the game, direct it and can approach what has happened in an indirect way.

Sometimes, especially after traumatic deaths, play takes on a somewhat repetitive character. The game is varied very little or not at all, in fact the child reacts if someone tries to change the game, and the game gives no lasting relief of tension. Following a divorce, for example, pre-school children may look for small things or objects they can put together endlessly, and this game clearly does not calm their inner disquiet or tension. In cases like these, professional help should be sought to get advice on how to give the child the best possible support.

More childish behaviour

Children may take a step backwards in their development. They may start wetting the bed at night or wetting themselves during the day even though they were dry before the loss. They may use more «baby language», suck their thumb, refuse to do things they had begun to master (like getting dressed, for example), insist that an adult sits by their bed while they are going to sleep, etc.. This sort of behaviour is

usually temporary, and if parents can be a little patient, they will find that it passes by itself.

Distressing reliving of events and disturbing fantasies

Sometimes children witness an incidence of death and are left with a strong sensory impression of this event. This may be the case if a baby has suddenly died in the home, or a child has died of asthma or something similar, or if the child has witnessed acute illness in one of her parents, or finds her mother or father dead as a result of illness, suicide or murder. Children can also receive strong impressions in the prelude to a loss through divorce, for example violence, threatening behaviour or verbal threats. In situations like these, the child takes in strong sensory impressions which may later return in the form of intrusive images and thoughts. In cases where the child was not present and hears about the event afterwards, she may develop fantasies about what happened which can become troubling. Even children under two years of age can have strong sensory memories, in other words, sensory impressions, which live on in their memories and can later be put into words when the child masters language better.

Things in the child's everyday life may remind him of his loss and initiate reactions. He may react to a smell that reminds him of Daddy, or he may begin to cry when he hears music that was played at the funeral on the radio. These grief stimuli can be connected to sensory impressions or symbolic situations: «Last time it was my birthday, I sat on Mummy's lap.» If the memories are connected to dramatic losses or situations, they are called traumatic reminders, like a car that looks like the one they were in when an accident took place, or the sea in the case of someone who has drowned, etc..

Thoughts about meaning

A number of children think about different aspects of meaning in relation to the loss, including how unfair it is that this should happen to them. This is primarily the case with children who have reached school starting age, but even very young children can express profound thoughts about the meaning of life.

Marianne, aged three and a half, was talking to her friend after her father had been killed in a tragic car accident and said: «It's so unfair that Daddy died before Grandma». This is an advanced use of language and advanced thinking in a child who is not yet pre-school age. One of the first days after the death, she developed a high temperature without any other symptoms. Then she shocked her mother so severely by what she said, that her mother telephoned the psychologist she was in contact with even though it was the middle of the night. What Marianne said was: «Do you know why I am sick, Mummy?» «No.» «It's because Daddy died».

Long-term reactions

While many of the reactions that have been described so far will subside during the first weeks and months after the loss, the sense of loss, longing and sadness can last for years, and to some extent for the rest of the child's life. This does not mean that the reactions will continue to be equally strong, but they can stay in the background of the child's life, especially if she has lost someone very close to her.

A very young child notices the loss mostly through the changes in his daily routines; it is no longer Mummy who reads to him in the evening, it is Auntie who takes him to kindergarten, etc..

A seven year old child would cry terribly every evening. She said that she missed her brother so much. He used to come in and give her a hug, but now he couldn't any more. She also thought about how he would have helped her with her homework when she started school, and he wouldn't be able to do that either.

There may be many things in the child's everyday life that remind her about the person who is no longer there. These reminders can suddenly fill her with sadness and she may cry without always knowing why. Adults can help the child to put words to this sense of loss and can comfort them when they are very upset.

If the death or loss happened suddenly, unexpectedly or in a particularly traumatic way, the event can potentially influence different aspects of the child's development. It is well known that traumatic events of this nature can alter a child's character and the shaping of his personality, his readiness to meet the future (reduced belief in the future), his ability to regulate strong feelings, his choice of career, and his relationships with others (fear of losing those who are dear to them). As long as the child has caring adults and good care, there is little reason to expect that he will grow up with a greater risk of developing long-term psychological problems. Among the risk factors which increase the likelihood of the child having problems are:

- The child witnessed what happened (death, or violence before a divorce).
- The parents or the surviving parent develop or are already struggling with major problems (depression, post-traumatic disturbances, etc.).
- The child experienced that he or she was in great danger.
- The child perceives strong reactions in the parent(s) without being explained why.
- The home circumstances are very negative for the child (alcoholism, neglect).
- There is a high degree of denial of the events in the home, and a complete absence of open and direct talk about what has happened.

If the child was present and witnessed or survived a dramatic incidence of death, or was witness to violent episodes in connection with a divorce, one should pay close attention to whether the reactions continue. If a child still reacts after four to five weeks in a way that indicates he is troubled by memories and thoughts (nightmares, sleep disturbances, restlessness and excessive activity, for example), withdraws from others, avoids anything that may remind him of what has happened, or shows reactions which indicate an almost constant sense of danger (he is always on guard, is excitable, irritable, etc.), then professional help should be sought.

If several risk factors are present and the child's behaviour changes remarkably, or strong feelings continue with the same intensity, a child psychologist or child psychiatrist should be contacted for advice on how the processing of the child's grief can be further supported.

Parents' reactions

The child's reactions to a loss will not only reflect his own grief and sense of loss, but also his parents' reactions to the loss. It is painful for a child to see his parents cry or find that his mother and father are not showing him the care they usually do. Parents who are suffering from grief will naturally have less energy to put into their children, and there are periods where parents can easily become impatient and annoyed when their children demand attention.

Many parents try to hide their reactions from their children in order to protect them. Our experience is that they are best served with parents who put their feelings into words so that they can better understand why their mother or father is reacting in the way they she/he is. This also makes it easier for the child to show her own feelings and to share her thoughts with her parents.

If it is a child who has died, it is very common for parents to become anxious about their other children. This often leads to over-protection or that they intervene in the children's lives in other ways to ensure that nothing happens to them.

What can be done to help children who have suffered a loss?

Early help for young children suffering grief

Below are some important guidelines for immediate help for children suffering from grief:

- an immediate sense of being taken care of
- a secure framework of physical closeness
- take the child onto your lap and relate what has happened, listen to the child's understanding of what you have said, encourage him to express his thoughts and questions, accept his reactions or lack of reaction
- place importance on giving the child information and facts about the loss which will contribute to a concrete understanding of the situation
- be careful to trace misunderstandings, misconceptions and magical thinking
- help the child find the personal meaning the events have for him
- set the scene so that the child can express what has happened in different ways, in other words, let the child talk, play or re-enact the events
- emphasise openness and honesty in the home
- return quickly to normal routines at home and in the kindergarten/school
- as parents you will find advice about children's reactions and needs very helpful
- inform the kindergarten and/or school staff at an early stage so that they can give the child the best possible support

It can be useful for even young children (from three to four years of age) to go through what has happened, as a help towards making their understanding as complete as possible and as a support for their memories at a later stage. This also helps children to clarify and counteract misunderstandings and prevents fantasies. The child needs help to talk about this or express herself in her own way. Her parents or another caring adult can help the child to take part in a preliminary conversation and go over what has happened.

After a loss, a child needs security and structure around him. This can be achieved by the parents, or the surviving parent, maintaining the routines the child is used to from his everyday life, such as meal-times, bed-times, etc.. When routines are maintained, they help to hold the child's life together and provide a sense of security, for although the world has become insecure due to what has happened, there is still stability in many areas of the child's existence.

At an early stage after the event of loss, one can make sure that the child is not creating fantasies based a lack of understanding about what happened.

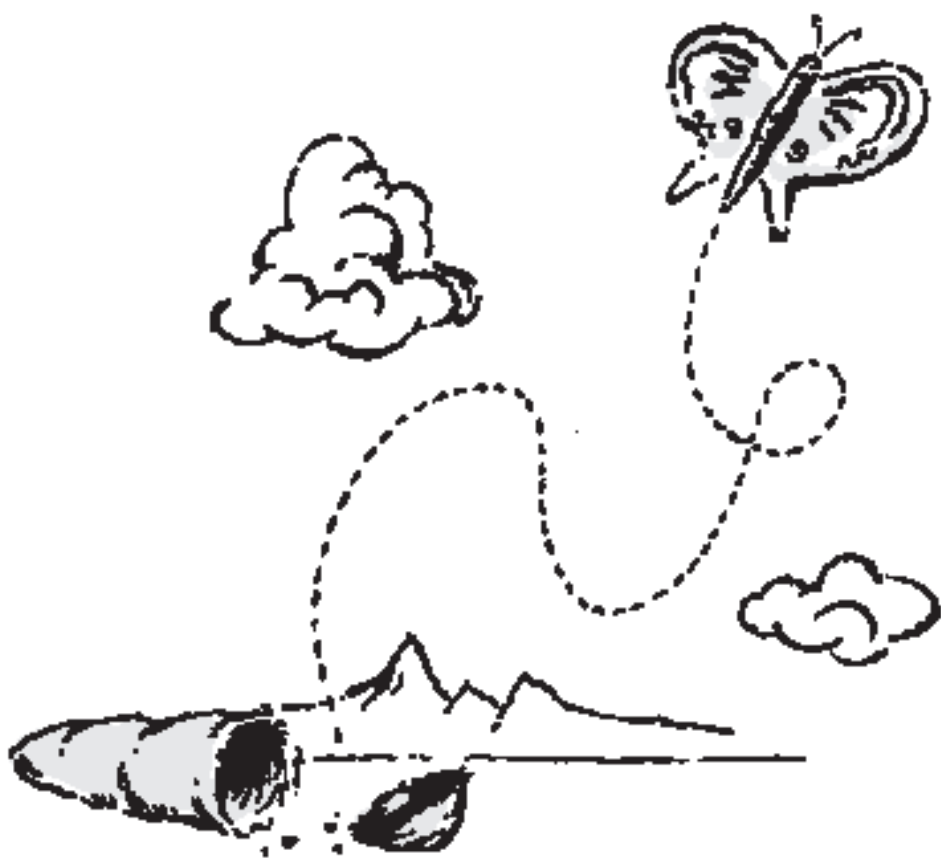
Trond was four years old when he witnessed his brother being killed in a traffic accident. He saw his little brother get run over and tells in a conversation more than ten years later that he had thought they had taken his brother to hospital to put a tube into his mouth and blow air into him so that he would become «big» again. He thought that he had become completely flat when he was run over and that he could be blown up in the same way as he had seen someone blowing up an air mattress.

This example shows how important it is not to take it for granted that the explanation and facts the child has been given are sufficient to ensure a correct understanding of the events. We must make an active effort to grasp the child's understanding of the situation, an understanding which frequently differs considerably from what one had thought the child was thinking. We gain insight into the child's version through the questions they ask us, the drawings they make, or by carefully asking them what they think about the events that have taken place.

If the child is also prepared for the parents' reactions, she will be less inclined to take on the task of comforting them, pleasing them or protecting them. Children who see strong reactions in adults can easily become confused and think that it is something they have said or done that caused the reaction. If you give an explanation for why you are reacting as you do, this will relieve the child's anxiety at the same time as she learns that it is all right to be unhappy or angry after something sad has happened. It is also exhausting for parents to go round pretending all the time, and in the long term this can make it hard to talk about difficult themes in the family.

What should the child be told?

Whether a loss takes place suddenly or not, information and discussions with the child will be of decisive significance for their ability to master what has happened. A number of parents use paraphrases when they tell their children about a loss. They might say that the dead person has gone to sleep, has passed away, or that Daddy had to work somewhere else, is travelling, etc.. Sometimes people put off telling what has happened or say that the person has been buried and will never come back. Many parents give what has happened a religious explanation: «God wanted him because he was so good», «She is with God now, so she's very happy» «When we die, we'll go up to Jesus and live with Great Grandfather». Pre-school age children find it difficult to understand abstract explanations and can struggle with the idea that someone is down in the ground and up in Heaven at the same time. They relate best to concrete explanations, and if you wish to give



your child a religious explanation because of your own religion or convictions, you should use concrete images which make it easier for the child to understand. You can for example compare body and soul with a butterfly chrysalis. When the butterfly comes out and flies up in the sky, just the chrysalis shell is left. Children often show a religious way of thinking, with concepts of the dead person living somewhere and being able to see them. They may have these thoughts quite independently of their parents' beliefs. If the child has not been introduced to religious concepts (God, Heaven) before, it is recommended that they be told concretely and directly what death means. The book «Det var en gang vi ikke var her» («There was once a time we were not here») by the Danish psychologist Anne Jacobsen (Hans Reitzels publishing house, Copenhagen, 1989) can be recommended as being very helpful in this situation. This book can also be used in the kindergarten, and is useful as a starting point for discussions about death when the children are gathered together. In this book, Jacobsen describes directly and with great insight, what happens when we die, what happens during the funeral and burial, and what happens afterwards.

To avoid a break down in trust between children and their parents, children must be given immediate and exact information. Allowing children to ask questions, giving them the answers we can, and saying «I don't know» when we do not know, helps the child to grasp what has happened. Children have the same need as adults to make the loss real, and that takes place gradually. It may therefore be necessary to talk about what has happened over and over again.

When a child needs to be told about an incidence of death, the following guidelines can be followed:

- Do not delay telling the child. If you feel «shattered», you can wait until you have gathered your thoughts a little, or get help from another person your child trusts.
- Chose a place where there is peace and quiet to break the news, preferably a place the child is familiar with and feels secure in.
- Give direct, open and honest information in language appropriate to the child's age. Give the child the chance to prepare himself for what is coming, for example: «I've something very sad to tell you. It's about Daddy. When he was on the train going to work today, the train crashed. Daddy hit his head very hard when this happened. Some doctors came to help him, but they couldn't save his life. He died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital because he was so damaged inside his head». Although adults often want to paraphrase the truth or just tell parts of it, for example after suicide, it has been shown that openness is best. It strengthens the bond of trust between the child and her parents as she grows up.
- Sit with the child afterwards. Let him ask questions if he wants to, but be aware of the fact that he may want to do something quite normal like going out to play, watching television, playing with lego, etc. straight after he has heard the news.
- Reassure her that you will still be there and that nothing is going to happen to you.
- As many children blame themselves for what has happened, whether it is death or divorce, it is important that the adult tells the child that it is nothing that he has done, thought or said that has caused what has happened.
- Since young children have a concrete, but often incomplete understanding of what death is, you are recommended to give concrete answers: «When we die, we stop breathing, our heart stops beating (let the child feel her own heart or your heart), and the person's hair and nails stop growing. Now that Daddy's dead, he can't feel anything, like if we pinch his hand, for example. He can't think any more either.»

Some losses are harder to tell children about than others. If their mother, father or a sibling have committed suicide, children are often given incorrect information or are not told the whole truth. These situations are a test of our ability to tell the truth. Children can be given the explanation that sometimes grown ups get an illness in their mind that makes them not want to live anymore. They get so sad inside, much more than you or I do, so they make themselves die. «Daddy took a pistol and shot himself with it so that he died.» It may seem brutal telling this to a pre-school child, but if you can manage to

be open right from the start, a sense of trust will be established which will be important in later childhood and adolescence. If the truth is not told, or only parts of it are told, the child may later realise or hear the truth from others, and may be bitter and angry that the secret had been hidden from him. Younger children usually relate to «strong» information in a level-headed and direct way and may ask questions like: «Where did it happen?», «Can I look at the pistol?», «Did he think about me?» etc.. It is mostly we adults who find being direct difficult, while children may take it quite naturally.

Telling children that their mother and father are going to get divorced should follow the same principle. Open, honest and direct information, preferably given by the mother and father together, help avoid upsetting the child as far as possible. You should, to the extent that you can, also inform the child what her everyday life will be like: where she will live, how often and how long she will stay with each of her parents, etc.. At the same time, parents should tell their children that they can telephone Daddy or Mummy often if they miss them.

Avoid unnecessary separations between children and their parents

It is quite common for parents to let others take care of their children when someone close has died, because they feel they are unable to look after them well. This may increase the child's fear that their father and/or mother will disappear. If someone is to help parents with care of their children, it is therefore best if it can be done in familiar surroundings in the child's home. The sooner the mother/father can give closeness and contact to their child, the better. But this is something each individual has to feel for him/herself.

3. Children's participation in rituals

Participation in rituals is important for children to learn about life and death. Rituals mark important events in a child's life, not only now but also in their future life. Being present at the funeral of a close family member is an opportunity the child will not get again, and this event can gain great symbolic meaning later in the child's life. This is one of the reasons that children's participation in rituals has been given such wide coverage in this book. The wake and the funeral help to make what has happened concrete and real. Participation in these rituals gives the child an important foundation for further understanding of what has happened.

However these rituals also prevent various fantasies of the type:

«Perhaps he isn't dead after all?»

«Perhaps there has been a mistake – it was someone else?»

Fantasies about what the dead person looks like can be even more difficult:

«How badly injured was she?»

Rituals provide the background for events which allow children to give direct expression to their feelings. By putting drawings, letters, objects or flowers in or on the coffin, by being able to talk to the dead person, by following the coffin to the grave, etc., concrete and direct expression of inner feelings is encouraged, expression which may be difficult to achieve in any other way. Children usually express themselves more through actions and play than through words, and ritual actions can give direct expression to subconscious and conscious feelings. At the same time, rituals consist of a clear beginning and end, so that the feelings are easier to deal with.

Rituals also give adults and children a common starting point for discussion about the death, not only in the following weeks, but also later in the child's life.

Participation in the wake

Preparation for the wake

Before a child is taken to the wake of a dead person, he must be prepared for this situation. This is of course particularly the case with the «older» young children. Being prepared means having been informed about:

- What the wake room looks like, including the way it has been decorated for example with flowers, paintings, candles, etc..

- What the coffin looks like, the fact that it is open, what colour it is, how it is decorated, carved, etc..
- What the dead person looks like, the colour of their face and hands, and if the death was due to an accident, suicide or murder: what injuries can be seen and which have been covered up. Someone who knows the dead person well should go in first and then tell the child in which ways the dead person looks different.
- The temperature in the room.
- That it does not matter if the adults react by crying a great deal and get very upset, that this is because they loved the dead person so much.
- That they are allowed to react just as they feel, and nobody will mind if they do not cry. If they feel like crying, that is fine.

Young children are not always patient enough to keep quiet and stay still for a long time in a situation like this. They may need to be taken out after a while or should be allowed to move around and play a little in the wake room.

The reason so much emphasis has been put on preparation for the wake, is because this reduces the likelihood of the situation being «etched» onto the child's mind in the form of a traumatic memory. A child who has been poorly prepared, can in the worst case experience negative, traumatic images being etched in detail and deeply into their memory. If the child has been well prepared, she will be able to recognise the situation:

«It's just like you said, Daddy!»

If the death takes place at home after a long illness, it may be natural for the dead person to be prepared and laid out at home until the funeral, and that the symbolic ceremony takes place there. Children will often form their own small ceremonies in this kind of situation:

Five-year old Grete's little brother died at home after a long illness. Afterwards he lay in his room for twenty four hours. His father put him in the coffin. Members of the family came and went and said their goodbyes. Grete said goodbye her own way. She stayed in her brother's room, sang and «read» for him and talked to him. She fetched a special flower from the sitting room and put it by his head, then she put a coin in his hand, and finally made sure he had a little car and his teddy with him.

The wake

The child should be accompanied by a close person whom he trusts, when he goes in to see the dead person. If his mother, father, sister or brother has died, the parents or the surviving parent will themselves



be in shock and grief, and they may need to go into the dead person first so that they have the chance to react freely without needing to pull themselves together for the child's sake. Afterwards, they can take the child in or another close person can take him in, explain what is going on, give him the support he needs, or take him out if he has had enough. It is particularly important to make the adults' reactions comprehensible to the child if he witnesses strong reactions from them.

Children who are present at the wake ceremony, must be allowed to give concrete expression to their grief. This means that they have in advance made or brought something to put in the dead person's coffin. This ritual action has great symbolic force and is important in the child's process of grief. Children only need to be given the idea of taking something they can put in the coffin, they will often have a number of concrete thoughts about what that should be. The sort of objects or things they can take are: a drawing, letter, poem, CD, book, photographs, message read into a cassette, hand-picked or other flowers, other objects with symbolic value, for example something they have made for Mummy or Daddy in their kindergarten.

They should put what they have brought into the coffin themselves, or into the dead person's hands; this is the most concrete way of saying farewell. Sometimes they may not be able to do this themselves and others have to assist. If the death happened suddenly, and there was no opportunity to say goodbye before the person died, then it is possible to say goodbye at the wake. This can be done by saying something aloud or inside, or by whispering something in the dead person's ear.

Young children learn through their senses. Some children go right up to the dead person and touch them, hands and hair are particularly important in this context, while others are more cautious. This should be treated with tact, the child should not be pressurised but should also be told that it is allowed to touch or kiss the dead person. If they do not want to, they should be told that there are other children who do not want to either.

Younger children who see the dead person in the coffin need to be told that the lid is put on before the coffin is buried. This is because

their concrete way of thinking leads them to believe that the dead person will get earth on them:

«It must be horrible for Mummy getting earth in her mouth down in the grave.»

If a child does not want to go into the dead person, you should spend some time outside, supporting and motivating her to go in, but do not exert any pressure. Some children go out again very quickly, but may want to go in again later. Let the child decide the tempo herself.

It has also become more usual to take photographs of the dead person in the coffin. Children have a less inhibited relationship to these pictures than adults. They may ask to see them, and want to show them to their friends and relations. Here also we must be careful about allowing adult barriers to inhibit children's natural needs. If pictures or video film have been taken of a dead child, these may be useful when children born later become interested in their brother or sister who died. The pictures taken can become an important support for the child's memory as time goes by, because the memory of pre-school children needs outer links and adult conversation to be maintained. It can be especially important for a child coming into the teenage years to have been present at a wake and then the pictures may be good to keep.

After the wake

Even if the wake ceremony takes place after careful preparation and with adult support, it can be a very strong experience for the child. The child must, therefore, have the opportunity to ask questions straight away, and to sit down with the adults and be able to talk about what they have all just been through. It may take some time before questions and thoughts present themselves and they should have the opportunity to express what they have experienced for some time afterwards. Children need to confirm their experiences. Young children who have had their first concrete meeting with death may say: «Now I can't have my bath with Daddy any more. Now we can't go for walks together any more.» This shows that the child is gathering these impressions into a new understanding of what death is. On other occasions, they may have a lot of questions or they may ask to go in again.

Pre-school children can re-enact rituals in detail after the death, when they are playing:

Five-year old Martha used the sand pit to act out her older sister's funeral. She repeatedly buried a toy lion. She put a cross on the grave, laid toy flowers on it, and invited adults and children to come and visit the grave. The repetition of these rituals helped her to integrate the events she had taken part in and gave her new opportunities to express her thoughts and feelings.

When should a child not participate?

Children should not participate in a wake in situations where the dead person has been unrecognisably injured. This is, for example, the case when the person has died in a fire and is very charred. Lesser burns, for example when the outer skin has been burnt and looks red, should not lead to the child being excluded. The dead person can be prepared so that a wake is possible. Some aeroplane and explosion accidents also mean that a wake is impossible because the dead person's body has been too severely damaged. Other ritual ceremonies can be used in situations like these. However, in cases where the dead person's body has been found a long time after the death and has not yet disintegrated, whether the body has been in the sea or on land, it would also be inadvisable to have the body shown.

Normally a dead person can be shown after traffic accidents, accidents at work, etc. despite extensive injuries. Sometimes parts of the dead person have to be covered up with bandages or in another way. It is not unusual for surviving children and adults to comment that «Those are his hands. Now I know it's him.» Many adults will worry about taking children with them if the dead person has been injured. Remember that children have as much right as the adults to be there. They will never have the chance again, and if they are prepared for the situation, they will react naturally and without drama. It is we adults who set up mental barriers for children's participation. Children experience these situations as concrete and natural.

Supposing the child is against it?

The child should never be pressurised into taking part. If the child is strongly against taking part, you can try to motivate her. «It's important that you come, because this is the last time you'll see Daddy. Later, when you're older, you'll think it was important that you came. I'll be there all the time, and you don't have to be there for long if you don't want to.» If the child is frightened about what she is going to see, you can say: «I know you're worried about what she looks like, as she was so badly hurt that she died from her injuries. I shall go in first, and then I'll come and tell you what she looks like.» It is unusual for pre-school children to not want to come as long as their parents do not dramatise things. If they are in doubt, you can say: «You don't need to decide this right now. Think about it, and we'll talk about it later.» It is often possible for children to have a look a day later than planned if they change their mind.

But you must also tell your child that he needs to be thoroughly prepared for what he will meet, and that other children who at first did not want to go to the wake, have later said that they were very glad that they did.

Supposing the parents are against it?

If the parents are absolutely unable to think of taking their children with them, staff from the children's clinic or a priest should ensure that they understand how important it is that the children are present, and the injustice we can do to children if we exclude them. When parents are in doubt, it is important that they have time to let these thoughts sink in. The reasons parents do not want their children to take part are usually:

- they think it will be harmful for the child
- other people have said they should not take the child
- they are frightened of the situation themselves, of how they will react and how their reactions may affect the child.

All experience shows that a child who is well prepared for a wake ceremony and is accompanied by an adult person who can give them support, will not be harmed by it. The advice to not take the child is usually based on the erroneous and simplified belief that it is better for the child to remember the dead person as he/she was, which does not take into account the long-term significance of participation in a wake can have for preventing fantasies and making the death real. Children who participate do not have more difficulties remembering the dead person as he/she was in life. The child's choice is often made by her parents, but it is the child who will have to live on without having had the chance to take part in an important family event. When the child gets older she may blame the adult for not letting her join in.

If parents do not wish their children to come, they should spend some time thinking about this. If parents know that the priest, the undertakers or staff from the children's clinic will be there and support them through the ritual, it will be easier for them to take their children. If they still feel unable to let their children come, it is important that they can tell them about it afterwards in as much detail as possible, so that the child's fantasies will be counteracted, and he or she will gain a better understanding of what happened during the ritual.

Should young children take part in these rituals?

Low age should not be a reason for not taking children to a wake. A very young child of less than three years will not understand very much of what is happening, but the fact that he has taken part will have great symbolic significance for him when he is older. This argument is, of course, only relevant if it is a close relative of the child who has died, like his mother, father, a sibling or grandparent.

«Karl, who is sixteen year old, says he wishes he had been to his father's wake and funeral at the time of his father's death when he was one year old. It would have been so good to know that my mother had carried me into Dad, and that I'd been there.»

The preparations must, however, be adapted to the child's age. The very youngest children will not understand what is happening and will have to be carried securely in someone's arms.

The funeral, memorials and later rituals

Much of what has been discussed under the section on the wake is also true for the funeral. Children should be well prepared, have a close, trusted adult by their side whom they can ask questions and express their thoughts and reactions to after the ceremony.

Ritual actions can be important for the child at the funeral also, in the form of a flower, a drawing, etc. which they can put on the coffin. Children who have lost a sibling, may want to tell a little story or rhyme he/she was particularly fond of, or sing the goodnight song he/she liked so much. This should not be pressurised, but the opportunity should be there.

On the part of the church, the priest should make his memorial words about the dead person simple, so that children can understand as much of it as possible, and he should also include important experiences that the deceased and the surviving child shared. The priest can reduce the adults' anxiety that the child will «spoil» the ceremony of the occasion by saying how positive and important it is that children are included and that it does not matter if they make some noise in the chapel.

Older pre-school children should be given the opportunity to take part in the gathering after the funeral where memories and episodes connected to the deceased are brought to life, memories which may be important for the child's understanding and respect for the deceased. However young children cannot be expected to behave formally and sit still throughout the whole of this memorial gathering. Children must be allowed to be children and should not be told off all the time because they are making a noise or are not showing enough respect.

Ritual ceremonies can later be connected to special days and holidays. These rituals may channel religious feelings, and they may serve as concrete connections to the feelings of loss, longing and grief. Many children share the belief that they will meet the dead person again in the after-life, even if they do not find comfort in other aspects of religion. Through ritual ceremonies, feelings can be expressed directly through action, and bridges can be built over the loss.

Ceremony and help in the kindergarten

Close friends from the kindergarten can also be taken to the funeral of a child, but they should be accompanied by their parents and staff from the kindergarten so that they are with trusted and close people who care for them. In some cases these children may be quite lost in this kind of ceremony, especially if there has been an event which has devastated a whole community so that the church is full. If this is the case, it could be arranged for the group of children to come up to the coffin beforehand (an hour before, for example), so that they can say goodbye in person and without being disturbed.

Rituals can also be used in the kindergarten. A memorial gathering could for example consist of the following:

- gathering the children together
- lighting candles, perhaps with flowers, next to a picture of the dead child
- a few words from the pre-school teacher about the child who has died
- songs/music

Candles could also be lit on special days following the death and up to the end of the Christmas or Summer term (for example the child's birthday). The children in the kindergarten can also be involved in packing up the things the dead child has left behind in the kindergarten. This must be done with the understanding of the child's parents. The children could also draw a picture for the child's parents, and these drawings could be given together with the personal effects which are to be returned. A candle could be lit next to a picture of the child up to the time of the funeral. After the funeral, the picture should be put out for the end of term performance and party.

No matter what has happened, the children should be told about the death. This should be done in a calm, concrete and direct way. As many children invent their own concepts of cause and chain of events, it is important to listen to the questions children ask and the discussions they have, so that any misconceptions can be explained and fantasies can be reduced.

If the children have taken part in the funeral, this could well be the theme for play and drawing for a while, as children process events naturally in this way. There may be many direct questions or comments:

«*Could I get ill and die like Morten?*»

«*I don't want to get dead*»

«*He'll come back after Christmas, won't he?*»

It is often necessary to talk about what has happened for a long time afterwards. It can be very useful to use books about loss and grief during this period. At the end of this book, there is a list of books which deal with the experience of loss for children in different ways, whether this is as a result of death, divorce or other causes.

Kindergarten groups

Parents should be present when an incidence of death which has taken place in the kindergarten, or that all the children have been deeply affected by, is to be gone over. The children can sit in a circle on their parents' laps, while the events are talked about. This gives the sense of security needed to be able to talk about such painful things as well as a shoulder to cry on if needed. The death should be gone through in a concrete way, using words the children understand, and carefully stimulating the children to relate what happened or what they have understood. Drawings, glove puppets, etc. can also be used to bring out spontaneous expression from the children. The adults may need to repeat the facts and at the same time ensure that these young children have understood what has happened. Young children do not have fully developed verbal skills to express different sides of the event, but they can be encouraged by listening to what other children say and by support from the adults. The information that can be given about the usual reactions in this group is limited, but they may be helped by some simple, concrete pieces of advice if they have sad or difficult thoughts:

- talk to Mummy or Daddy about it
- let happy thoughts come and push the other ones away
- make a trap to trick the bad thoughts, etc.

Young children have a small repertoire of mastery and therefore need simple pieces of advice on what to do. Sometimes they can think of ideas more easily if you say: «What can we do when we get difficult thoughts about what has happened?» Sometimes you can get a rush of suggestions from young children when they get the chance to use their imagination.

4.

How do children process what has happened over time?

Children have a great need to be reminded of the person who is no longer there, and at the same time to process what has happened. They can be helped with this in different ways:

Keep the child in touch with concrete memories

Children look at pictures of the person who is no longer there. There may be periods when they do this every day, and the child may at the same time chose a toy she associates with the dead/lost person which she carries around with her and which she wants to have in her bed with her when she sleeps. This can be seen in even very young children.

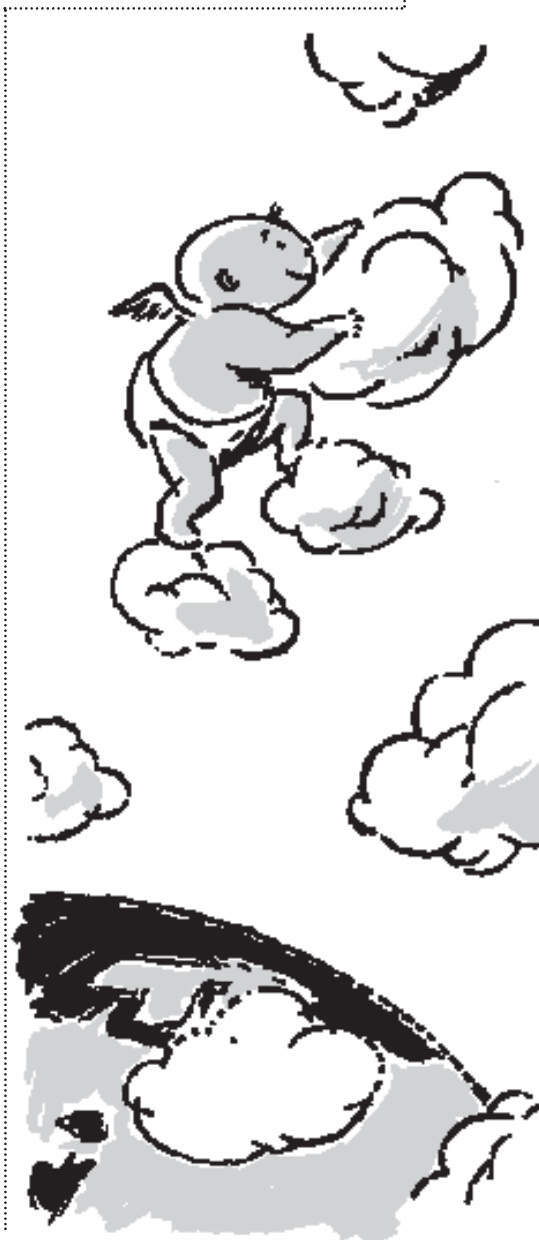
Children want to visit the grave. If the cemetery is close to the child's home, he can visit the grave alone from about the age of seven. After an accident, the child may find it helpful to «inspect» the scene of the accident to take in what happened. In some cases, it is first then that they understand what has happened. They may also want to visit places they have been with the deceased. Even though it may be difficult for parents to do things like this with their children, it will be a great help for them.

Let the child ask questions

The child grasps and processes what has happened through the answers her parents give to her questions. Parents relate that they are asked a lot of questions about the dead person and about death.

«Did the baby have to climb all the way to Heaven?»

«Is it cold down in the grave?»



It is through asking these constant and rather detailed questions that the child increases his ability to understand and master what has happened. The child's direct, and sometimes brutal questions may be both painful and difficult to answer, but parents must answer truthfully, and they must admit to what they do not know. If a child is mature enough to ask a question, he is mature enough to hear the answer. The child needs to hear the chain of events repeated over and over again in order to understand what has happened and to counteract misunderstandings.

Even very young children can be unwilling to talk about what has happened. It is too painful and they may need some time before they are able to talk about the loss. If the child is otherwise acting normally in the kindergarten and/or at home and she is getting on well with her peers, there is no particular cause for concern. This reaction reflects the way the child is regulating the strong feelings she has. She will gradually open up and will set the tempo herself.

Play helps children to understand better

Many children carry out funeral rituals where they bury animals and insects. This is both helpful and supportive for them as they try to understand what has happened to the dead person. They may also make drawings of graves with crosses or of other situations associated with death or loss. This is the natural way for children to express themselves and it helps them to grasp what has happened. Parents should not try to stop play of this kind.

Having coloured pencils or pens readily available for the child may encourage him to draw what has happened, or the fantasies, thoughts and feelings he has. Many children from the age of three to four years are able to express thoughts and feelings in this way. But parents can also provide support for the child by getting involved in role play or play acting, which the child is directing, for example when he is testing out what death is by pulling the bed covers over his head and says «Now I am dead».

If the child was present at a dramatic incidence of death, you could try to have toys available which can be used to recreate what happened, for example a boat if it was a boat accident or an ambulance if the child was present when the ambulance came for the person in the accident, etc..

You could also make a memorial album with the child, where pictures and drawings and other things the child has made are stuck in. Newspaper cuttings and other things the child associates with the person who is no longer there can be kept in a special box, which the child can fetch and look at when she wants to.

Music is another important means to help the child express feelings and thoughts. By playing music or singing songs the child associates with the person who has died, can bring forth tears and the loss is allowed to rise up and be given joint expression. Talking about loss is often better with music in the background. Sometimes music can

release the lump the child is carrying inside himself. The child can also use various musical instruments to express the whole range of feelings from anger to sadness.

Children can protect adults

Children pick up at an early stage what they can talk about and what they should not ask or bring up. They can see when Mummy or Daddy are sad and they realise when their parents have had a bad day. In the first instance, they avoid talking about the loss so as not to cause additional pain. In the second instance they come and comfort and give support: «Don't be sad, Mummy, you've still got me.»

Some children become very upset from seeing that their parents are sad. A five-year old asked his mother to pull up the corners of her mouth and show her teeth, saying: «You don't need to smile, but you can pretend to.»

It is not easy to deal with reactions like these. Adults must be allowed to show their feelings and mourning adults cannot be expected to put their face into a smiling mask all the time. The child's disquiet may be lessened if adults put words to their reactions, and explain that grown-ups feel sad in a more even way when someone they love is no longer there, while children are involved with other things which mean that they can forget their sadness for a while. Meanwhile, the child needs to be told that Mummy and/or Daddy will gradually become less sad, and although they are feeling sad, they will always be there for her.

Provide closeness and physical contact

Young children need closeness and physical contact to feel secure. When Mummy or Daddy is carrying them, they feel themselves being rocked and cradled and the touch of their hands and tone of voice confirm the feeling of closeness and security. Changes in the rhythm and intonation of the voice, a different facial expression with less smiling than usual, and less time for cuddles and care, are picked up as signals that something has happened. A loss, especially when dramatic and sudden, often results in parents giving their children less physical contact. This can give children a feeling of insecurity and can make them restless, complaining and clinging, which can lead to a vicious circle. So it is important that parents maintain physical contact in these situations.

If the child has been present at a dramatic event in connection with the loss, careful stroking, patting and simple «body massage» will help to calm the child and will help prevent the child developing problems over time. Keeping up physical contact will signal continuity and security in the child's everyday life, in addition to the fact that it is believed to have a directly soothing effect on the tension the child may be feeling.

5. Supporting the child over time

Children continue processing a major loss over time. As they grow older and more mature, they will have new questions to ask. They may become interested in other aspects of the loss: «Was it because Daddy didn't love me that he didn't want to live here any more?» «Do you think Mummy died because I didn't tidy my room?» Adults need to listen out for changes in the child's way of thinking and to be willing to follow them in their philosophical thoughts about how things are. Children gradually develop a greater capacity for thinking in more complex ways, and some may create rescue fantasies where they rework what has happened in their thoughts, sometimes with themselves as heroes, preventing the loss. Masterful thoughts like these are usually a sign of good mastery, but with the increasing ability to imagine the chain of events differently, they may also become more judgmental towards themselves: «If only I hadn't shouted to Daddy, the accident wouldn't have happened.» Thoughts like these are more common in school children, but some pre-school children can also grapple with such thoughts. Sensitive adults who are open to these thoughts, and do not just say «You mustn't think like that» straight away, can help the child gain control over and overcome this kind of self-blame.

Pre-school children may suddenly be filled with loss and longing and can think about the person who is no longer there for a long time after the loss. Sometimes they want confirmation that adults are thinking about that person too:

Jørgen was four and a half years old when his father died. About one year later he looks at his mother, waits a moment, then asks cautiously: «Do you think about Daddy when you open a door?»

This shows the way he thinks of his daddy and misses him in completely everyday situations. As his mother did not mention him so often, he wanted to know whether she also thought about his father a great deal.

Children who lose someone early in life, often take longer to build up an existential sense of security. For children who have lost someone dear to them early in life, it is not a matter of course that those they love will always be around them. As their concepts of the world, what it is like and what can happen in it, develop, there will be space for much disquiet and anxiety. If, in addition to the loss of a parent through death or divorce, children also experience other changes in their life, like moving, changing kindergarten, or the appearance of a new person who is going to look after them when their mother or father is at work, this insecurity can be intensified. Stability in the child's everyday life contributes to an increased sense of security. The child may also need reassurances that the remaining parents are still there and will stay with them. «Mummy isn't ill. Mummy isn't going to die, she'll always be with you.»

Loss can have an effect on a child's development and can make her vulnerable to later losses, or can lead to her inner «models» or presumptions about the world around her being different from other children's. Caring and understanding adults in the home, in the kindergarten and at school reduce the chances of the child developing in an unbalanced way.

Looking back later in life, it is difficult to remember things that happened before the age of five years. This puts a particular responsibility on us adults to help the child maintain an inner picture of the person who is no longer there. Only by talking about the lost person, looking at pictures, video film etc., is it possible for the child to keep an inner picture. The child needs this picture to continue processing what has happened over the years to come. Whilst it was thought a few decades ago that it was important for the child to forget, we have now learned that the inner picture the child has of the person who has died is important for him later, when there will be periods when he is very interested in the mother/father or sibling who is no longer there. It is easier for children to keep their good memories when adults talk to them about the person who is no longer there, not just in the first period after a loss, but also over a long time.

Advisory services for parents

When children experience grief, their parents are also going through a difficult period. Many parents can find that their ability to take care of their children is reduced for a while. This may lead to them:

- being less aware of their child's needs
- having difficulties maintaining rules and discipline and being more lenient with their children
- being more irritable and bad-tempered
- being more over-protective and cautious

Many parents struggle with guilty feelings about the way they have been treating their children.

A mother and her two children experienced a dramatic death in the mother's family. Things went well for the first weeks, but during the course of the first six months, the mother became more and more depressed, in addition to the fact that she blamed herself for what had happened. Therapy helped the mother to get her feelings of guilt under control and she became less depressed. As she got her own problems under control, she became overwhelmingly guilty about her two pre-school children: «I haven't been able to take care of them. I have been so bad-tempered and cross. How awful it must have been for them» One of the children in particular had been severely traumatised from having been present at the death, and later needed help from a psychologist. The help to the mother consisted of recognition of the fact that she was exhausted, that she had done her best and that she could learn from this. Meanwhile her self-reproach was greater than it

needed have been, so that going over everything she had in fact done for her children, helped her gain a more realistic evaluation of the situation.

Good support for children is best promoted by the parents being able to process what has happened. In addition they should also seek information and advice about their children's needs, children's usual reactions and how they can support and help their children. Staff from the health service and kindergartens can give advice on how children should be cared for after a loss. If parents can get help to alleviate painful memories, irritability, fatigue or depression, they will have more energy to take care of their children. Participation in groups for adults after a divorce or loss through death can play an important part in helping parents to cope better.

It is particularly important to ensure openness and directness in the inner communication of the family, so that new facts about the loss can be passed onto the children, and so no difficulties or breakdown in confidence occur in the interaction between children and their parents.

When parents divorce, they must each avoid «blackening» the other when they are together with the child, so that the child does not end up in an awkward position between the two. If a child has to listen to negative characterisations of one of her parents from the other, her inner picture of her mother and/or father will easily become confused. Children who experience this also develop a lesser belief in themselves (a weakened self-image). Discontent with the other party must be dealt with at an adult level, without the child being made a messenger of negative messages or reproaches, or a discussion partner or comforter for the parent. The better and the closer the relationship between the child and the parent who is no longer living with her on a daily basis, the less the negative effects of the divorce will be for the child. One of the most important things parents can do after a divorce is to build the best possible relationship with each other. This helps to prevent children being afraid for the future, or feeling anxious or frustrated with life.

If the parents are really exhausted, other caring people can be a good support for the children. If the parents can accept that they do not have enough energy for their children for a period, it is easier for them to understand that other adults whom the children trust. can be useful people who can give them support for a period after the loss. There is a great difference between not having enough energy for one's children for a while, and ignoring this fact.

If a child has died, it is important that the parents get help to prevent them becoming over-protective and extremely anxious for their other children. Talking about these fears, being aware of them, and simple pieces of advice which help to counteract them, can prevent these fears having an effect on the other children's develop-

ment of independence and from limiting their life experiences unnecessarily. Some examples of simple pieces of advice are:

- Train yourself gradually to let your children go from you.
- Watch out for the safety of your child in a way that the child does not notice (for example by looking out of an upstairs window).
- Reassure yourself with calming words like: «Nothing is going to happen to him», «Other children are all right».
- Use simple relaxation techniques like those taught at ante-natal classes.
- Avoid reports which reinforce your anxiety, for example reports about other children who have been injured or have died.

Summary of advice to parents

Here follows a number of pieces of advice which can help parents to support their children in the grief they are experiencing. It must be emphasised most strongly that these pieces of advice must be adapted to the individual situation. The following can be recommended:

- Make it quite clear to children that they are free to react. If children are uncertain how their reactions may be met by adults, they may hold them back. It may therefore be a good idea for adults to say that it does not matter when children or adults become sad or angry when someone dies or parents are getting divorced, and they do not need to hold back their reactions because they are afraid of being laughed at, or of making the adults sad.
- Help children to recognise their reactions and understand what has happened. This does not mean that you should tear down the need children may have to take in the loss little by little, but that you do not enter into a joint denial of what has happened.
- Say that you will be there in the future. It is important for children to have such reassurances, because they are often afraid that their parents or the remaining parent will also leave them.
- We adults must listen for underlying themes and deeper meaning in children's comments, questions and behaviour. Children seek actively for frameworks of understanding which they can use to grasp what has happened. They must re-shape assumptions about the world, other people and themselves, and even very young children may have many deep thoughts about different aspects of existence.
- We adults can tell children that the thoughts, feelings, wishes, behaviour and experiences they have are normal. The strong and often unfamiliar reactions children experience can be frightening because they do not have any earlier experiences as a basis of comparison to help them to understand these thoughts and reactions. Even when children keep such thoughts and feelings to themselves, or are not old enough to formulate them, it can be important for adults to put into words the usual thoughts and feelings in a situation like this, so that the children understand what is going on within them.
- Help young children to recognise, name and differentiate between feelings. Tragic situations can give children such strong experiences that their feelings may be pushed right away or seem to be a whirlwind of powerful reactions they have no control over. While adults have developed the ability to distinguish between feelings, children need an adult's help to put words to, to understand and to differentiate these feelings.
- Traumatic losses make it difficult to regulate the strength of reaction, which may mean that children either try to avoid these strong

feelings or they feel completely overwhelmed by them. It is a good help if parents help children to put words to these feelings or express them in another way, and to regulate the strength of these reactions.

Other pieces of advice are:

Open, truthful communication

- Do not wait to tell the child about the loss. Give precise information about what has happened.
- Say that the dead person will never come back
- Tell about the wake and funeral
- In the case of divorce – explain why and what it will be like

Avoid confusion

- Do not talk about travelling or sleep. Give exact information about what has happened.
- Avoid abstract explanations
- Give explanations which are suitable for the child's age.
- In the case of divorce – do not paraphrase what is going on, do not give false hopes.

Allow time for thoughts to be mastered

- Take time to talk with the child about all that is difficult.
- Questions from the child must be answered, even if they have asked the same thing many times before.
- Go through the chain of events with the child several times.
- Listen to the child's thoughts and interpretations about what has happened/is happening.
- Let the child draw and play about what has happened or is happening, so that they can express what they are feeling in their own «language».

Make the loss real

- Let the child see the dead person.
- Let the child take part in the funeral (wake).
- Do not hide your thoughts and feelings for the child.
- Keep reminders in view, make an album, look at pictures, video film.
- Take the child to visit the cemetery.
- Grief, loss and longing are natural reactions in children. Let the child feel that he can show these feelings.
- In the case of divorce – let the child see his «new home» where he will be spending time with his father or mother at an early stage.

Continuity in the home, school, kindergarten

- Avoid the situation where children have to be separated from their parents, for example by having to stay with their grandparents; even short separations can create anxiety.
- Try to keep to the normal routines at home.

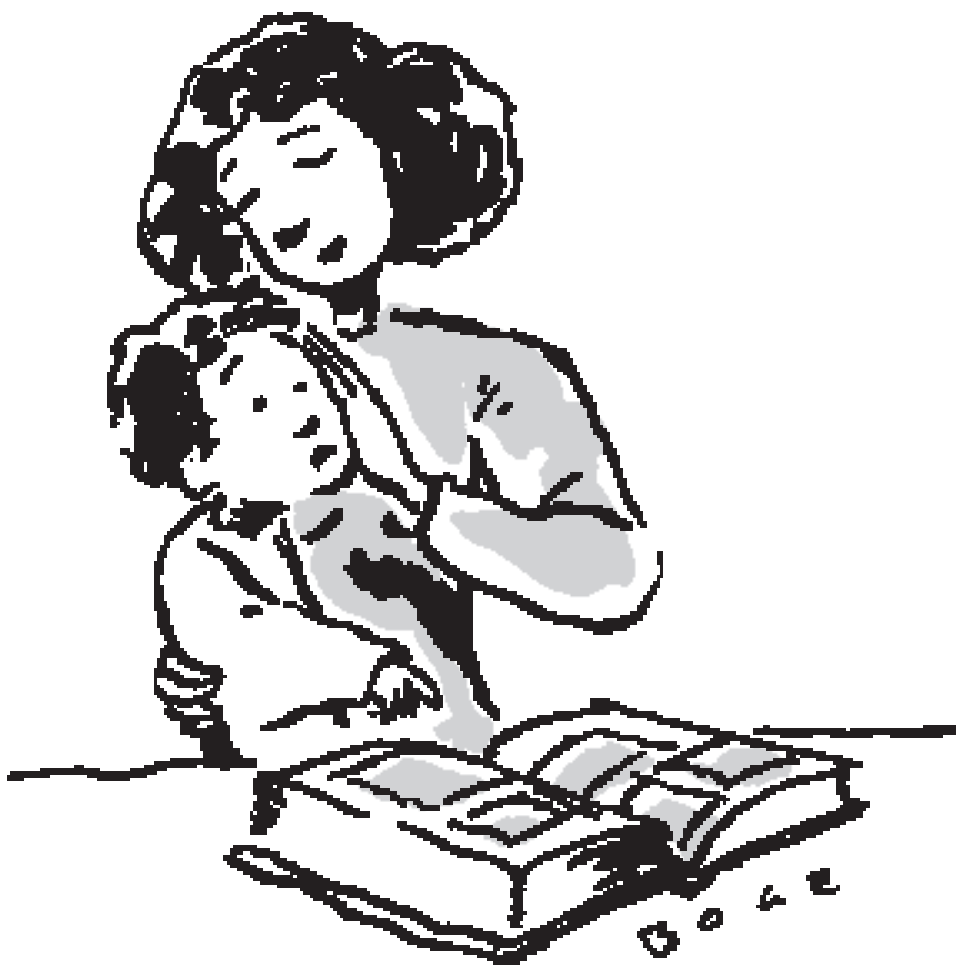
- Accept the fact that the child may have an increased need for closeness and security.
- Let the child go back to kindergarten or school soon afterwards.
- In the case of divorce, the child will feel reassured by having familiar things with her (teddy, duvet, dummies, etc.) and this will ease the transition to a new situation.
- In the case of divorce – establish set routines for spending time with each parent as soon as possible.

The child's anxiety that he himself or his parents will die or go away, is alleviated by:

- Talking with the child about the fear he is feeling. Give reassurances that his parents will be there and that death/loss happens very seldom.

Relieve any feelings of guilt by:

- Letting the child put into words, play or draw what she is thinking.
- Reassure the child that nothing she has thought or done caused what happened.



7. Specific pieces of advice

Below are some simple pieces of advice which can be followed if the child shows reactions which continue for longer than the first weeks after the loss. If the reactions are strong and lasting, and these pieces of advice do not help, you are recommended to seek professional help.

Problem	Advice
Increased anxiety	Stability in the home. Set routines. Reassurances that you are nearby. Physical contact, massage.
Lack of understanding about the loss	Explain in a concrete way. Use drawings, take the child to rituals, give him facts.
Confusion	Give repeated explanations.
Anxiety about every separation	Set routines which are carefully followed. Reassure the child that you will fetch her from her kindergarten, etc..
More childish behaviour	Expect this for a while. Begin gradually to demand that the child manages things by himself.
Anger	Help the child to put words to and to direct her reactions. Make use of active play.
Sleep disturbances	Set bedtimes, the presence of the adult is gradually stepped down, low music.
Nightmares	Let the child tell and draw in detail what has happened in his dream. Sit by his bed and stroke him gently on his back.
Avoidance reactions	Cautious, gradual approach to the subjects the child is afraid of. Adult support and consolation. Reassurances, quiet talks and comforting body contact (patting, stroking as you approach the things the child is afraid of).

Problem

Restlessness and over-activity

Sadness and loss

Advice

Physical contact, touch, patting and massage. Rhythmical songs. Quiet times reading. Telling stories.

Normal reactions which will last for short periods over a very long time (many years). Give comfort and support, confirm the child's experience of loss and longing. Do not say: «Now you've got to be a big boy/girl and stop crying».



Conclusion

Children grieve in different ways. There are more similarities than dissimilarities between adults and children's grief. The same loss and longings, the same 'strange' thoughts and powerful emotions which are found in adults, can be experienced by children who have lost someone they love. However, children's reactions depend to a great degree on the way we as adults are able to respond, and the foundation we give them for processing their feelings and reactions.

By letting children take part in rituals for grief, by keeping communication channels open and truthful, and by talking with the child about what has happened, the best basis is laid for the child to process his feelings and reactions. This puts a heavy responsibility on the parents, who are grieving themselves. But this also makes the basis for a future close and secure sense of togetherness in the family.

Reading list

Books about loss which can be read to children:

- Alex, M. & B. Alex: Bestefar og Maria. Luther Forlag. Oslo 1988.
- Ducker, R. Å.: Maria. Damm. Oslo 1977.
- Grupe, M.: Hugo. Damm. Oslo 1969.
- Gydal, M & M. Andersson: Slik var det da Olas farfar døde. Pax. 1973.
- Haaland, K. R. & I. Landsem: Even og skilsmissen. Universitetsforlaget. Oslo 1996.
- Jacobsen, A.: Det var en gang vi ikke var her. Hans Reitzels forlag. Copenhagen 1989.
- Johnsen, A. N.: En annerledes dag. IKO Forlag. 1988.
- Jotun, G.: Lillesøster Siv. Lunde. Oslo 1990.
- Kaldhol, M. & W. Øyen: Farvel, Rune. Samlaget. Oslo 1986.
- Knutsen, P.: Gull og sølv. Gyldendal. Oslo 1982.
- Lindgren, A.: Brødrene Løvehjerte. Damm. Oslo 1974.
- Nilsen, R. A. & B. M. Løveid: Da Karlsen døde. Gyldendal. Oslo 1979.
- Nystrøm, C.: Ellen tar farvel. IKO Forlag. Oslo 1991.
- Reuterswärd, M.: Dager med Kubbe. Gyldendal. Oslo 1970.
- Selmer-Olsen, I.: Klart det. Tiden. Oslo 1988.
- Skeie, E.: Sommerlandet. Luther Forlag. Oslo 1985.
- Vinje, K.: Gud og jeg er venner. Luther. Oslo 1983.
- Warrebäck, R. M.: Robbans bok – om när pappa dog. Proprius förlag AB. Stockholm 1995.
- Wiger, M. & J. K. Øien: Tåreklumpen. J.W. Eides Forlag. Bergen 1989.

Literature for adults about grief in children:

- Dyregrov, A.: Grief in children. A handbook for adults. Jessica Kingsley publishers. London 1991.
- Edvardson, G.: Barn i sorg, barn i krise. Kolibri Forlag. Oslo 1987.
- Jacobsen, A.: Kan man dø om natten? Gyldendal. Copenhagen 1987.
- Jewett, C. L.: Når barn sørger. Universitetsforlaget. Oslo 1984.
- Ronge, K.: Vi som blir igjen. Grøndahl Dreyer. Oslo 1986.