



Supporting loss in the early years

Early Years Alliance mini-guide



Loss for a child may not just be related to the death of a close family member or friend – here's how you can help support them through difficult times

Supporting an early years child in the setting who is grieving a loss is not an easy process. Important in ensuring the child's wellbeing in these circumstances is helping them to find ways to deal with what has happened by understanding and expressing their emotions.

Different types of loss

Different types of loss may be experienced by a child and they can have short or long-term experiences of this:

- Loss of a toy – this can provoke real feelings of loss when an important source of comfort and security has gone
- Disappearance or death of a much loved pet – the animal may have been a close and trusted friend of the child
- Loss of a familiar environment when moving to a new home or area – this can be a frightening time as the secure, safe environment that the child knows well is gone
- Position in the family – a new baby can displace status, affection and attention

- Absent parent – caused by divorce, separation or job commitments such as working away in the armed forces
- Loss of a parent's care and attention – related to a mental or physical illness or an addiction such as gambling, alcohol, or drugs

Loss for a child may not just be related to the death of a close family member or friend.

How the child may behave

As each child is different they will respond to loss differently with varying impacts on their behaviour. They will not always react in the same way as adults do, as they do not have the skills of communication and vocabulary to understand and voice their feelings effectively.

Young children may not be able to explain that they are feeling angry but will display angry behaviour, will not tell others of their disbelief but will hide in a corner away from the situation. Children may alternate between being upset one moment to playing calmly the next and in this way overwhelming feelings may be regulated.

Children might also regress in their development due to a loss. For example, they may return to wetting when they have learnt to be dry, become weepy and clingy were before they were always confident and independent.





Ways to help

Adults should not assume that a child is too young to understand what is happening. Children will pick up on the feelings of sadness, distress and anxiety of others around them. It is important to support children to understand and put a voice to their emotions and be careful not to discount the significance of losses we may feel are minor, such as of a teddy bear.

Consider the following practical ideas:

- Use objects or pictures to help the child identify and show their feelings, use emotion pictures, dolls, or wooden spoons with faces drawn on.
- Make a memory box with the child including photos, pictures and objects that they can return to.
- Allow the child to bring in a comfort toy from home to increase their feeling of connection and security at the setting. Alternatively, allow them to take a toy home from the setting. Establish boundaries about the toy with the child, for example, we leave teddy at the door to the toilets because he cannot wash his hands like we do.

Key person's role

The key person in a setting has a special responsibility when dealing with the loss and grief of a child as they will understand the child and their parents best. They cannot 'make things better' but they can support the child to understand and talk about what they have lost and answer questions sensitively. They can support other children in the setting to talk about the loss too.

The key person should establish what the parent has already told the child about events that have happened. Children under six years old do not yet understand the permanence of loss, for example they may expect that a person who has died will return home and may repeatedly ask what has happened to try to make sense of it.

It is important for the child to understand that it is normal for them to feel different emotions after a loss. Parents can be supported to be aware that their own emotions will affect the child but that by feeling sad in front of them this will allow the child to express their sadness too.

Simple and honest talk

Talking about the loss in age-appropriate terms simply and honestly without euphemisms is important. For example, language that might be comforting to an adult might be confusing to a child such as, 'he's sleeping now' which might make the child concerned about sleeping.

Questions can be answered by asking the child what they think and building upon their answers without judgement and with respect to family customs or beliefs.

A key person should never feel alone with the responsibility of dealing with a family's grief. They should be given opportunities and time to discuss the situation with their line manager who can advise on understanding the child's behaviour and responding to parents.



Childminders should connect up with their local support networks and childminder groups to share experiences. This strategy will help practitioners remain calm and professional and avoid becoming overwhelmed themselves by the feelings of the child and family.

Getting extra support

Practitioners can signpost parents to further support where they feel it is needed. For example, if a child's behaviour shows their distress levels are significant or alternatively, they show no effect from a major loss at all over an extended period of time they may need additional specialist help to recover from their loss.

The key person can support parents to seek advice from their health visitor or GP who may further refer them to their local Child and Adolescent Mental Health team.

Find out more

Supporting Children's Experiences of Loss and Separation (Pre-school Learning Alliance 2013)

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