



Support after a Sudden Death

AFTER A SUDDEN DEATH:

Understanding and Supporting My Child

For Parents and Caregivers of Primary and Intermediate Students

The sudden death of someone your child knows, even if they didn't know them well, is likely to be distressing and unsettling for them. They're probably seeing others around them upset and grieving as well. It may be someone within the school community, or a member of their family, whānau or friend group who has died. Children can find out about a death in many ways – overhearing others talking about it, through social media, on the news, or being told by someone. Some children may not really understand death yet and what it means. Your care, support, comfort, and reassurance can help your child feel safe and more able to cope.

What to expect

Every child's reactions will be different. Many things will influence your child's response, like their age and developmental stage, their level of understanding about death, personality, how well they knew the person, their culture, their beliefs, what else is happening in their lives, past experiences, and the kind of support they are given, or not.

Grief is a normal process that helps all ages gradually adjust after a difficult loss. Most children tend to grieve in short bursts. They'll show moments of distress and then they'll be back involved in their other activities and seem unaffected. It's often an up and down experience for them. Some might show no reactions at all at first but then have some reactions later. A few children may be seriously affected and preoccupied by what's happened for quite some time. Every child will grieve in their own way.

Your child might also experience some traumatic stress.

This is a normal reaction if what they've seen or heard was very upsetting for them. It means that reactions caused by the frightening situation may continue for a time.

Grief and traumatic stress after a sudden death can both affect a child in a range of ways. Their emotions, thoughts, behaviour, and physical health can all show reactions. Every child is different.

- **Emotional reactions may include:** shock, disbelief, deep distress, confusion, sadness, increased anxiety and worry, clinginess, increased irritability, frustration and anger, guilt, blaming, feeling rejected/abandoned, embarrassment, shame, a low mood or very up and down, bewildered, or overwhelmed.
- **Other reactions may include:** wanting information, asking why and searching for reasons, preoccupied by what has happened, can't concentrate on things, difficulty sleeping or sleeping more, appetite changes, more physical complaints like tummy aches, nausea or headaches, changes in behaviour, temporarily reverting to younger behaviour, bedwetting, separation anxiety, increased temper tantrums, disruptive at school and/or home, social withdrawal, tensions with others, or less interest in school work and activities.
- **Children experiencing traumatic stress may additionally experience:** numbness and a lack of reaction, replaying difficult memories over and over, unsettling flashbacks, wanting to keep talking about what happened or not wanting it ever talked about, avoidance of bad memory triggers, heightened anxiety, panic attacks, constantly on alert for more threats, easily scared or startled, more distrusting, or not wanting to go to school.
- **For more information** about the Grief Reactions of Different Age Groups, see: <https://www.kidshealth.org.nz/bereavement-reactions-children-young-people-age-group>

Continued over...

**They may forget what you said, but
they will never forget how you made them feel.**

Maya Angelou

Some children might want to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and reactions – and others won't. It's not always obvious that a child is distressed. They may try to hide their feelings or don't know how to share them. Children need understanding and support to deal with this loss in their own way.

For most children, reactions will gradually ease over time, but can last longer than you expected. For a few children, reactions might continue or perhaps worsen. If you are concerned, get them some extra help. (See below)

It's normal for a child to remember a sad death as they grow up. Memories can resurface at any time. They might experience fresh grief reactions and have new questions, even years later. They will always find your understanding and support reassuring.

Ways to support them

Help your child to feel safe, loved and supported by showing them you care about them, and about what's happened.

- **Talk with them gently and briefly about this sad time.** Parents and caregivers are the best ones to talk with their child about it and to answer any questions they have. Keep things simple. Use language suited for their age and understanding. They might have more questions or comments in the coming weeks.
- **Give your child opportunities to share their positive memories of the person.** Avoid focusing a lot on how the person died.
- **If they want to talk, listen carefully.** Listen more than you talk. If they don't want to, let them know that's okay. Remind them you're there if they'd like to talk another time. Chat about who else they could talk to as well.
- **Reassure them they're safe.** Tell them who's looking after them. Remind them who loves them. Extra hugs, holding their hand, or a comforting pat can remind them you're close by. What else might bring comfort? A favourite movie? Cuddling a special toy? Playing with a friend? They may want to be with others more or want more time alone. What helps them most?
- **Help them to keep up routines and normal activities.** These are reassuring in uncertain times.
- **Care for their everyday needs well.** Eating healthy food, drinking enough water, getting exercise and enough sleep and rest all help in stressful times.
- **Let your child know it's normal to have all sorts of feelings after someone dies,** like feeling sad, worried or angry. If your child feels guilt after a death, let them know they're not responsible for what happened.

Talk about helpful ways to manage strong feelings and difficult thoughts. For example, taking some slow, deep breaths if they're anxious, or talking to someone they trust when they're really sad. Model managing emotions well yourself.

- **Reassure them that enjoying things, laughing, and playing with others are still okay.** These things help release the stress inside and can give them a break from big feelings for a while.
- **Check in with your child regularly.** Look for natural moments to have a chat. Spend time with them. How are they doing? Children often worry about different things to adults. Check on their worries. They'll often use play to express what's inside. Look out for any concerning changes in mood or behaviour.
- **Got concerns?** Deal with these honestly when they come up. Don't let them build up. Reach out for extra help and support whenever it's needed. (See below)
- **Support them into the months and years ahead,** especially when it's an anniversary time or a special day.

Getting some extra help

- Talk to your child's teacher and/or your school's pastoral care staff about your concerns. Ask them about the help options.
- Organise for them to visit a doctor or school nurse to check any physical complaints they are experiencing.
- Encourage your child to talk with a counsellor or other support worker about what they're finding hard.
- For free support or advice about your child, or for yourself, phone or text **1737** (available 24/7).
- In an emergency crisis, if you believe they're at immediate risk of harm, call **111**.

If the death is a suspected suicide

This situation can be especially difficult for a child, particularly if they already struggle with their emotions. Your ongoing care and support are very important. We recommend using these resources to support them in this situation:

- Search 'suicide' in NZ Victim Support website's Resource Centre for the resource called '*After a Suicide: Supporting your Child or Young Person*'
- Search 'suicide' at <https://victimsupport.org.nz/> for the resource called '*After a Suicide: Supporting your Child or Young Person*'.
- This Conversations Matter resource for parents is Australian: <https://conversationsmatter.org.au/resources/telling-a-child-about-suicide/>