

Childcare and children's health

HEALTH CARE INFORMATION FOR CHILDCARE STAFF AND FAMILIES
FROM THE ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, MELBOURNE

Understanding and responding to the grieving child

Adults often rely on a prevailing myth that children are too young to grieve. Evidence however has shown that babies as young as six months manifest early signs of separation anxiety when they find themselves without their primary caregiver for any length of time. It is important to recognise that children at any age become attached to people, places, pets and possessions. When they experience a loss they will experience grief, although it may not manifest in the same ways as adults or in ways adults recognize.



WATCH FOR TIMES TO SUPPORT THE GRIEVING CHILD.

Developmental issues play a large part in influencing the grief behaviour of children. Recognising that cognitive and emotional capacities, not to mention physical and social functioning, are in a constant state of flux, it is hard to describe childhood grief patterns in one single descriptive statement. Grief is not a static process, particularly with children.

A child strives to understand their experience of loss from their own frame of reference and often in very concrete terms. In the absence of clear information about illness and death a child will write their own script – often with themselves as the central player. A mother, who was

dying of cancer, and her family visited the beach. Her young son repeatedly asked her for an icy-pole. After some time she relented. A number of weeks after her death her young son believed that he had killed his mother. His reasoning was that “I asked mum for an icy-pole. Icy-poles are junk food and are bad for you. If mum hadn't had that icy-pole she might still be alive today”. These strong feelings of guilt can also give rise to self-blame and confusion.

The way children think can affect their capacity to understand the finality, inevitability and irreversibility of death. A young child may see death as a temporary absence. Describing death euphemistically as “sleep” can further reinforce this misconception and lead to sleeping difficulties in the child. As children develop they are able to think about the world in increasingly complex ways and therefore tend to re-grieve their losses over time.

Infants and toddlers react to separations, either temporary or permanent, often by protesting vigorously. This often takes the form of crying, restless searching, heightened anxiety and irritability. The reactions of very young children tend to be bodily ones such as feeding difficulties, bedwetting, constipation and sleeping difficulties. Children don't grieve consistently. A child tends to mourn in “doses”, on an intermittent basis. Older children can interrupt their sorrow to watch television or play with friends, bewildering adults who wonder if the child really understands and appreciates what has happened. A child may regress and return to behaviour that had been given up prior to the loss, they may become uncooperative, irritable, apathetic or aggressive. ▶

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It is important that we respond to grieving children. We need to watch for times when they seem to require support and attention. Structure time to spend together, but respect moments when the child chooses to ignore their grief. Children will often look for reassurance from adults about their own safety and that of important people in their lives. Most of all children will need honest, realistic, age appropriate information about the loss event, to be comforted and feel understood. There are many books and videos that can assist children in understanding their experience of loss. Through this sharing we can give permission for a child to ask questions about their loss and to find some meaning in the experience. We need to allow children to teach us about their grief and to accompany them in their experience of loss. We need to listen carefully to the grieving child.

Grief is a high-energy activity. It generates a broad range

of emotional reactions and can be exhausting. An outlet for this energy of grief can often be found in ritual. Ritual has the capacity to create a safe place with which to engage with the energy of grief and creates a container to hold grief. It is important that we give children choices about their participation in ritual. Lighting a candle, taking flowers, making a drawing, an opportunity to view the body of a loved one and attend a funeral, can be effective ways of facilitating understanding and receiving support. The question we need to ask is no longer “Do children grieve?” but “When children grieve will they be surrounded and supported by caring adults?”.

QIAS – Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 5.2, 5.3, 7.1

FDCQA – Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 3.1, 3.4, 3.6

Christopher Hall, Director

Centre for Grief Education

Helping young children to self-regulate

An introduction to the important developmental task of self-regulation was presented in the last edition. This edition introduces some specific strategies for supporting self-regulation in the following areas:

- **Emotion regulation**
- **Behaviour regulation**
- **Attention regulation**

This information is presented in relation to infants, toddlers and preschool aged children.

Helping infants

During the first year infants begin to learn about their environment, adapt some of their responses to the environment, form expectations about their environment and become motivated to engage in activities in their environment.

Infants need warm responsive care environments so they can learn to predict and categorise. They also need experiences of being effective in their social and physical worlds.

- **Emotion regulation**
 - Provide regular, predictable patterns in the environment as well as responsive care such as predictable routines at bedtime and predictable ways to soothe the child who is upset.
 - Provide dependable responses such as regular ways of greeting and acknowledging the child with smiles and delight.
 - Surround the child with items of interest and challenge.

- **Behaviour regulation**

- Stay close to infants even when they are exploring independently. They can then experiment and indicate when they may need assistance in situations they cannot handle.
- Respond to any efforts from infants to interact. Support their efforts to communicate.
- Support the internalization of routines which they can later practise independently by participating in social activities such as Peek a Boo, hiding games with rhymes and sequences.

- **Attention regulation**

- Provide visual, and auditory stimulation with things familiar and novel. This helps the infant develop focussed attention and form expectations about the environment.
- Support the child to control things in the environment, trying to match the level of stimulation needed by the child. Provide materials suited to the child’s age and demonstrated skills, and watch for his/her responses.

Helping toddlers

During the toddler years children actively push toward independence. They respond to requests and may feel anxious if they violate rules. They engage in more active exploration, experimentation, and mastery activities with objects. Simple strategies are used for interaction with people and objects. They develop language and the ability to use it to describe their own activities, influence the

activities of others, and communicate more effectively. Their developing language assists them to remember and internalise rules. They listen to what adults are saying and this is effective in helping them to build up what is known as private speech or messages that guide self-control. They have increasing motivation to be competent.

Toddlers need scope and appropriate challenges to develop autonomy, as well as limits and guidelines that help develop inner control. They need caregivers that they trust to help them regulate behaviour appropriately and develop new strategies and skills.

Toddlers can be passionate about order, repetition and routine in their efforts to understand and influence their environment. They explore and control objects more deliberately now. They will use a lot of trial and error, gradually becoming more able and deliberate in their skills and choices.

• Emotion regulation

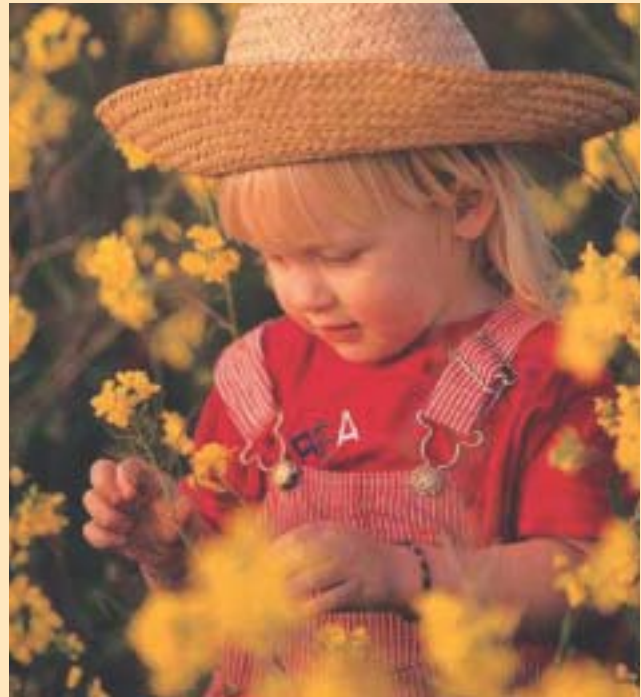
- Emphasize individual control over behaviour, offer limited appropriate options, use suggestions rather than commands whenever possible, and focus on explanations and reasoning rather than demands. These are most likely to lead to internal control.
- Construct the environment with opportunities to learn and exercise social skills without over-stimulation or excessive frustration. The child should be able to master most of the social and physical challenges without many experiences of losing control.
- Be available to help children resolve difficulties.
- Use conflicts between children as an opportunity to notice and respect the feelings of others.

• Behaviour regulation

- Model desired behaviour rather than demanding it. Children can choose to imitate these behaviours setting their own standards for self-regulated activities.
- Use suggestions rather than demands, offer to help or join a child in a requested activity. Even emphasising the attractiveness of the requested activity may help.
- Offer selected (appropriate) choices in daily routines. Use sensitive consideration of the child together with a gentle firmness in these activities to avoid the development of battlegrounds.

• Attention regulation

- Order and predictability in the environment is important so that children can exercise more



BUILD UPON THE CHILD'S STRENGTHS TO HELP THEM SELF REGULATE.

control when they know where to find things, what comes next, and how to participate.

- Carefully observe children's play. Protect the child's lengthening period of focused attention in independent play, as this develops self-direction and persistence.
- Provide play materials and social activities that give them opportunities to create effects by their own actions, to go through several steps to reach a goal.

Helping preschool age children

Preschool age children are increasingly capable of voluntary internal self-regulation in both social and cognitive areas. In a widening range of situations and with increasing reliability they can manage their emotional responses, comply with age-appropriate rules and directions, and independently carry out problem solving and mastery tasks. They are interested in other children and are developing self-regulated strategies for successful and cooperative social interaction. They are internalising social rules and attitudes and developing consistent styles of interaction, including pro-social or antisocial dispositions. Motivation for self-regulation increases during this period if children feel competent and able to direct themselves. Children are now internalising their understanding of the behaviour and attitudes (values and beliefs) of the important people in their lives.

• Emotion regulation

- Suggest that children express angry feelings in words rather than in actions.

- Focus on problem solving and appropriate alternative strategies, for example: *"When you feel so upset by the other children, you could choose to play by yourself for a while."*
- Include rationales when giving directions so that children understand the reasons and can reflect on this reasoning in different situations.

• Behaviour regulation

- Recognise effort, achievement, consequences of action, for example:
"You really worked hard on that building." (effort)
"You matched every pair correctly." (achievement)
"If you give the truck back, he will feel better." (consequence of action)
- Ask questions and encourage problem solving on their own.

• Attention regulation

- Recognise persistence, for example:
"That puzzle was hard and it took a long time, but you kept going till you finished it."
- Give feedback on progress, for example:
"If you put in the last two pieces, the puzzle will be finished".

Introducing this approach in your child care service

Supporting self-regulation in emotion, behaviour and attention in young children can provide a very worthwhile framework for positive interactions between adults and children. Consistency in approach, in home and away from home settings, is preferable. To achieve this, it may be helpful to consider the following:

- Hold an information session for **all parents** at the centre level or family day care scheme level to talk about your commitment to supporting self-regulation in children and discuss some of the strategies you are adopting. Photocopy the articles

relating to self-regulation to give to parents for discussion and for their reference at home.

Remember this approach may be substantially different from what they are used to. You will need to ensure that you retain the focus on this positive developmental approach so that parents leave the session with a firm understanding of what you are trying to achieve and how you are going about this. Encourage the parents to think further about this approach and how they might extend this approach with their children at home.

- At an **individual family level**, exchange information about the child so that all adults continue to learn and gain a real understanding about the strengths of the child. Keep parents informed about the specific strategies that you are adopting and encourage parents to continue the approach at home and to tell you about the child's response. Be mindful of the three areas where you would like to support the child.

Remember:

Success in one area assists success in another area of self-regulation, and problems in one area can undermine development in another. Success in helping children with self-regulation will require a real commitment to understand and build upon the strengths in children. It will also require persistence and consistency in approach between early childhood professionals and parents.

QIAS – Principles: 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.4, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 4.4, 6.5, 6.6

FDCQA – Principles: 1.1, 1.2,1.3, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.6,

Summary by Dr. Tim Moore and Jan Duffie from:

Bronson, M.B. (2000). *Self-Regulation in Early Childhood: Nature and Nurture*. New York: The Guildford Press.

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THE CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH Tel: (03) 9345 6150 Fax: (03) 9345 5900 Email: archerc@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au