

Signs of a child's unresolved grief

NB These behaviours would be usual in the early stages of grief and are only signs of unresolved grief if still occurring some considerable time, after the event.

- The child cannot talk about the person who has died or they are separated from (eg now living with one parent due to family breakup) without experiencing intense and fresh grief.
- The child cries a lot.
- Relatively minor events trigger intense grief response.
- Theme of loss comes into conversation frequently.
- A child may surprisingly start to lose important belongings.
- The child frequently asks for help with things they can easily do for themselves.
- The child who has experienced the loss is very protective of any of the person's gifts and possessions and can become extremely distressed when anyone else touches these.
- Following the death or separation from a parent or someone special some children make radical changes in their lifestyle.
- Children may become isolated, withdrawing from their friends or avoiding contact with people who may remind them of the person who has died or they are separated from.
- Children's self esteem can become low and they have little self confidence.
- Children struggle with school work, are unable to concentrate and their performance declines.
- Some children have a prevailing sense of guilt and sadness, imagining that they have contributed in some way to the loss or death of the person who has gone. Others can feel temporarily omnipotent and euphoric that they have contributed to the person leaving their lives but then become profoundly afraid of their own imagined power.
- The child unconsciously imitates the person who has died, or they are separated from in an attempt to stay emotionally connected with them.
- The child's play may focus on family break-up and coming back together again, illness or death.

- A child may lose interest in playing and usual activities for their age ... they don't seem like a child anymore.
- A child can become preoccupied and nervous and develops fears that are unrealistic.
- Sleep problems can develop, sometimes bed-wetting.
- The child may want to be or is encouraged to take on the role and responsibilities in the family of the person who has died or left. However well meant, this can interrupt the child's natural development and put them in positions for which they are not competent.
- Self destructive impulses: self harm, risk taking (nothing matters), explosive anger.
- Unexpected sadness at certain times of the year, eg birthdays, holidays, anniversaries.
- Phobia about illness and death. When a child has been separated from their parent or sibling as a result of a parents' or sibling's death or long term illness, drug abuse, imprisonment, etc. they may be afraid of inheriting the disease or growing to be like their parent or sibling or worry that they too may die early.
- Personal triggers which distress the children, as these triggers are reminders of the person who has died or the child is separated from. For example, stories which the person who has died might have read to the child: music they have shared: places they have visited and so on.