

# Helping a child after road trauma



Children have unique ways of understanding death and other traumatic events, depending on their age and level of maturity. Just like adults, they vary in their ability to cope with road trauma whether involved in a crash, being a witness to a crash or having lost someone they were close to.

With sensitive and caring support from the adults in their lives they can usually adjust well. This fact sheet provides some strategies for parents and other adults to assist a child to cope after road trauma.

## How children grieve

Children experience the same feelings as adults but their grief may not be expressed the same way. For example:

- Grief is not constant, but comes in bursts – sometimes it may look like the child isn't affected at all. For example, they may want to go out and play as normal even though they have heard some sad news.
- Feelings may be expressed through behaviours, physical symptoms and play or drawings. Changes in

behaviour may include temper tantrums, becoming easily upset, clingy behaviours, acting like a younger child, not wanting to go to sleep in their own bedroom, playing out the loss with toys or drawing scenes of death and trauma. Physical symptoms may include lack of appetite, poor concentration, nightmares and pains in the body (e.g. stomach aches or headaches).

- Children's understanding of what death means changes as they grow up. Adults understand three things about death:
  - everyone eventually dies (death is universal);
  - death is final and permanent;
  - the body stops functioning after death (i.e. we can't feel anything once we are dead).



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Children don't necessarily understand these concepts. For example, a three-year-old may believe that the dead person will come back and therefore won't be as upset as an older child who understands that death is permanent. So, depending on the child's developmental level, they may wonder about things like 'does one death lead to another? Will I lose other people I love now? Am I in danger of dying? Did I do something bad/wrong which caused the death? Where has the dead person gone? When will they return? Is it painful to be cremated?' These are not questions that an adult would typically think about.

It's important for the parent, caregiver or guardian to have some understanding about the child's developmental level so that they can have helpful conversations about death and clarify any misconceptions that the child may have. This also has implications for how children grieve over the longer term.

As children develop and understand more, they may ask different, and more specific questions and experience feelings that were not relevant before (e.g. anger at discovering that their loved one was killed by a drunk driver, guilt because they ran out onto the road and caused the crash etc). They will usually "reprocess" or experience deeper levels of loss at each stage of their development. This is sometimes called "regrieving" and it's important that parents, caregivers or guardians understand that this is normal and healthy.

## How you can help a child after road trauma

- Be honest about what happened. Children need to know the truth within their ability to understand. Ask them questions like 'what did you hear about?', 'what do you think happened?', 'what does dead mean to you?'. As calmly and sensitively as you can, provide the

correct factual information – remembering to keep this appropriate for their age. Don't make assumptions about what the child is thinking or understands about the road trauma.

- Use words such as 'he died/was killed/is dead', rather than indirect or abstract language such as 'she's sleeping/has passed/was taken by God' etc. Remember that a child may think that this means that the person will wake up, come back or return. They may also become confused and frightened and worry that they too will be 'taken' or die if they go to sleep. Give basic facts and provide answers to questions as children ask them, rather than giving them too much information. Answer questions as soon as you can but admit when you don't know the answers and instead offer to find out for them and follow through on this.
- It's okay for children to see you grieve. Children learn about grieving from the adults in their life, and they need to know that it's okay to grieve. Reassure them that any sadness or negative emotion you express as a result of the road trauma (e.g. crying) is not about them. Reassure them that they will still be loved and cared for, despite what has happened. Be careful not to expect children to provide emotional support for you, or share too much detail about what you are experiencing (remember that they don't have an adult's understanding of events). Acknowledge their feelings but continue to set boundaries with them. For example, "I notice that you seemed angry this morning which is okay, but it is not okay that you hit your sister".
- It is common for children to think that death or injury is because of something that they did and that they are being punished for it. Reassure them that they are not responsible. Statements like "there is nothing anyone (or we) could have done to stop this from happening" can be helpful.
- Explain what will happen from now on so they know what to expect. For example, if there will be an

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investigation, funeral, cremation etc. Let them know who will be involved and what they might see. Provide an opportunity to participate but do not force this.

- Inform everyone who is part of the child's life (e.g. school teacher, school psychologist, other parents, neighbour, doctor etc.) about the road trauma, so that they can provide additional support and let the child know this is being done.
- Let the child know that it's okay to talk to people outside of the family about what they are feeling. Sometimes children, like adults, find it easier to talk to someone outside of the family. It may be helpful to discuss with your child, what they can say to their friends and teachers, so that they don't feel stressed about it.
- Maintain normal routines and expectations such as bedtime, school and sporting activities as much as possible. Routine provides feelings of safety and security which is important following major trauma.
- Encourage children to play with their friends, and also with you. Children need the ability to continue being children even after a loss or traumatic event. Some children may feel guilty if they start to enjoy an activity or experience. Reassure them that being happy does not mean that they are 'bad' or do not care anymore. Let them know that happiness and sadness can live side by side.
- Provide opportunities to remember and connect with the person who has died. Talk about positive memories, e.g. "mummy loved to read stories and sing with you", "remember how daddy", "remember nanna", "you know how granddad". Continue to remember and acknowledge the person who died during anniversaries and special events. Invite the child to honour the person's memory in a way that feels okay for them, (e.g. writing a poem or card explaining how they feel, drawing a picture, creating a memory box with mementoes of the loved one).
- Read a children's book that deals with the subject of death and then answer any questions they have as honestly as you can in an age-appropriate way. Ask your local library for recommendations or see the websites listed at the end of this fact sheet.

## When to seek help

This fact sheet has discussed different ways in which children can be affected by grief and trauma. In many cases, with caring support from the adults in their life,

children will adjust well and just like adults, grief for a loved one will become part of their experience for the remainder of their life. As children develop new awareness and greater understanding, their reactions will change, and they will need to be supported through this at each stage.

You should seek help if you are concerned about how your child is coping, or if you have questions. Signs that your child may need some additional support include:

- grief behaviours which become very repetitive or last more than a few months;
- enduring physical symptoms;
- self-harm or harming others;
- signs of depression – such as no longer caring about anything, no energy for any activities in their life, withdrawal or frequent crying.

Sources of help include your general practitioner, school psychologist or Road Trauma Support WA (RTSWA). Your GP can refer you to a local psychologist who specialises in grief/trauma. You can also contact RTSWA and make an appointment to see one of our counsellors, or just ask to speak to someone over the phone. If you are concerned about a child in your care, contact us.

## About us

Road Trauma Support WA is a state-wide service assisting anyone affected by road trauma, regardless of when the incident occurred or what level of involvement (direct or indirect) the person had.

FREE counselling sessions are available.

No referral required.

### We provide:

- Information and support;
- Education and training (costs may apply); and
- Counselling.

We are committed to being respectful of cultural and family values and provide our service in a safe, non-judgemental environment.





**Road Trauma  
Support WA**

- information
- support
- counselling

## Support services/websites/blogs

**Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement**  
[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

**My Grief Assist**  
[www.mygriefassist.com](http://www.mygriefassist.com)

**What's Your Grief?**  
[www.whatsyourgrief.org.au](http://www.whatsyourgrief.org.au)

**Be You**  
[www.beyou.edu.au](http://www.beyou.edu.au)

**ReachOut**  
[www.au.reachout.com/tough-times/loss-and-grief](http://www.au.reachout.com/tough-times/loss-and-grief)  
[www.au.reachout.com/articles/experiencing-trauma](http://www.au.reachout.com/articles/experiencing-trauma)

## Further support services

**Lifeline** 13 11 14

**Kids Helpline** 1800 55 1800 (ages 5-25)

**Crisis Care** 9223 1111 or 1800 199 008 (free call)

**GriefLine** 1300 845 745

**Rural Link** 1800 552 002

**Headspace**  
[www.headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/](http://www.headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/)  
[www.headspace.org.au/eheadspace](http://www.headspace.org.au/eheadspace)

**Samaritans WA** 135 247 or 1800 198 313 (Youthline)  
[www.thesamaritans.org.au](http://www.thesamaritans.org.au)

**Child and Adolescent Health Service WA**  
[ww2.health.wa.gov.au/About-us/Child-and-Adolescent-Health-Service](http://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/About-us/Child-and-Adolescent-Health-Service)

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**Every year in WA, thousands of people are impacted by road trauma.** Losing family and friends, dealing with injuries, caring for those injured, causing a crash or witnessing a serious crash can have a devastating and enduring impact.



**Road Trauma  
Support WA**

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