



Radio Stations : **All Community Radio Stations**  
Subject : **Early Childhood Development**  
Audience : **Parents, caregivers and educators**  
Program Topic : **Dealing with Grief and bereavement with small Children (EXTRACARE)**

#### **Guidelines to the presenter**

- Presenter – please familiarize yourself with the brief and the use the facts effectively by referring to them from time to time during the show.
- You should be seen as a peer rather than an authority.
- Offer guidance or opinion rather than telling people what to do.
- Encourage people to seek further information
- Always keep the objectives and outcomes in mind and drive these.

#### **Topic:**

Dealing with Grief and bereavement with small children

#### **Objectives:**

- Develop understanding that the way babies and young children grieve is related to their age.
- Encourage caregivers to be responsive and attentive to possible grief and bereavement that children are dealing with and act accordingly

- Develop understanding that grief in children can result in difficult behavior and sometimes even detachment.
- Share how parents and caregivers can deal with grief and bereavement within the context of their community and culture.

### **Introduction**

Babies and young children grieve differently depending on their age. Grief and bereavement is a process which has various stages that babies and young children go through. Each baby and young child experiences it in a unique way. The manner in which parents/caregivers deal with their own grief and bereavement influences how their babies and young children will deal with grief and bereavement. Children should consider grief and bereavement as a natural part of life. Babies and young children should participate in the family's grief and bereavement process when there is a death in the family. Talking to your child about death regularly and openly is a good way to prepare them for situations of loss. When children are unable to deal with this they can sometimes show negative behaviour and become detached.

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Facts/Information</b>
<p>1. <i>Today we are talking about grief and bereavement in young children. Death is something that everyone has to deal with at some time, including children. Children often have to confront this early in life. What is grief?</i></p>	<p>Grief has to do with the inner emotions of a person and does not always show in how they behave. Bereavement, on the other hand, has to do with the inner emotions feelings, attitudes and reactions of the person experiencing the loss.</p>

<p>2. <i>Many people believe that children do not experience grief or that they even notice that a person has gone. Is this true?</i></p>	<p>Parents/caregivers frequently believe that babies and young children do not understand loss or death in the family, and that they will easily forget the person who has died or not even notice they are no longer around. This is not true; like adults, babies and young children experience loss and separation. Death affects children too – and even death of a pet, or divorce can result in loss and grief in children.</p>
<p>3. <i>How do children handle grief?</i></p>	<p>In the early stages of grief and bereavement, children struggle to deal with a range of emotional issues as a result of their loss. Each baby and young child has their own particular way of grieving. When babies and young children grieve, they are often labelled ‘difficult’ and ‘not satisfied’ because, for example, they experience great sadness and can also be very aggressive at the same time.</p>
<p>4. <i>I imagine that just like with adults, there are stages to the grieving process for children too?</i></p>	<p>Babies and young children grieve in the same way as adults. Although each human has their own way of grieving, there are usually three stages involved in the process of grieving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>STAGE 1 Protest and denial:</b> This is when the baby or young child does</li></ul>

not want to accept the fact that the person they are grieving for is not there anymore. They may show protest and denial in their behaviour by crying, being sad and sometimes having angry outbursts for no reason.

- **STAGE 2 Despair and**

**disorganisation:** During this stage, the baby or young child will not follow his normal routine, and may even go back to previous physical developmental stages. For example, if a baby has been sleeping through, he may start to wake up at night again for no apparent reason; or a young child who was able to sleep without wetting the bed, may start to wet his bed again; or a young child may stop talking although he had been able to say certain words.

- **STAGE 3 Reorganisation:** During this period, the baby or young child begins to have less emotional stress and returns to his usual routines and regains the skills he lost for a while. For example, the baby may start sleeping through the night again after a period of waking up for no

5. *How should you explain to a child that someone has died?*

reason; or he will wake up when he needs to use the potty instead of wetting the bed; or he may regain the language abilities he previously had.

Death is one of the hardest subjects to broach with young children, especially when you're struggling to deal with your own sorrow. But death is also an inescapable part of life, and children want to understand it and find ways to grieve that feel natural.

**Express your own emotions.** Grieving is an important part of healing, for both children and adults. Don't frighten your child with excessive grief, but don't make the subject off-limits, either. Explain that grownups need to cry sometimes, too, and that you feel sad because you miss Grandma. Your child is keenly aware of changes in your mood, and she'll be even more worried if she senses that something is wrong but that you're trying to hide it.

**Avoid euphemisms.** Common adult phrases for death — "resting in peace," "in eternal sleep" — are confusing for a young child, so don't say that Grandpa is "sleeping" or "has gone away." Your child may worry that

<p>6. <i>Can children understand death?</i></p>	<p>going to bed at night means she'll die, too, or that if you leave for the office or the store, you won't come back.</p> <p>State the reasons for the death as simply as possible: "Grandpa was very, very old and his body couldn't work anymore." If Grandpa was sick before he died, be sure to reassure your child that if she gets sick from a cold or flu, it doesn't mean she'll die.</p> <p>Explain that there are different ways people get sick, and that we recover from minor illnesses like the ones your child usually has.</p> <p>Preschoolers are aware of death from early on. They hear about it in fairy tales, and encounter dead bugs, birds, or squirrels on the sidewalk or roadside. Some children may have already experienced the death of a pet or a family member.</p> <p>Despite this, there are aspects of death that kids this age still can't understand. For example, they can't grasp that death is permanent, inevitable, and happens to everyone. Nor can they understand that being dead means that the body no longer functions. They may believe that the deceased still eat, sleep, and do normal things — except that they do them up in the sky or down in the ground.</p>
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<p>7. <i>What are the signs that a baby or young child is grieving?</i></p>	<p>No matter how many times you explain it, preschoolers can't really understand what causes death, and they may think of it as something that's temporary and reversible.</p> <p>Parents/caregivers need to recognise abnormal and unusual behaviour in their babies or children in order to be able to recognise grief and bereavement.</p> <p>Parents/caregivers can choose how they are going to react to situations that cause grief, but babies and young children do not have that choice. When they grieve, all they know is that they have a feeling that they do not like. This often leads to a baby and young child seeming to moan and nag for no particular reason</p> <p>Sometimes grief can result in children being very detached and not wanting to bond or form relationships. Just because a child is not crying, does not mean they are not grieving, Children experience grief differently to adults and need continued, consistent love and attention to help them feel safe and secure again so that they can deal with their loss.</p>
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8. *What practical advice can you give to parents to assist them to help a young child who is grieving?*

There are many ways to deal with a grieving baby or young child. The first step in helping a baby or young child cope with grieving is to calm down the baby or young child if they are screaming or crying. Do things that make your child feel safe and secure in this strange situation. Try to talk about the things that scare them or make them feel uncomfortable. Parents/caregivers must act in a loving and caring manner to help the baby or young child feel safe and secure. Try to get them to play with a toy, or in the case of a baby, with something such as the parent's/caregiver's finger. Anything that will soothe them can be used as long as it does not hurt them or endanger them in any way.

Once they are over the first stage of grief it is important to make sure that their baby's or young child's trust has not been damaged and to maintain their self-esteem or restore it. It is a good idea to get the routine of the baby or young child back on track. The parent/caregiver must also make sure that they are there and available for the baby or the young child; although they must not make promises they cannot keep. Always talk to the baby or the young child in a loving and caring manner.

<p>9. <i>Should children attend the funeral of a loved one who has died?</i></p>	<p>This is largely dependent on their age and if it is right for them and if they want to. Your child may not be ready to attend a funeral (particularly an open-casket), but she can participate in memorial services in whatever ways she might feel comfortable. She can light a candle at home, sing a song, draw a picture, or take part in some other ritual observance.</p> <p>If she does want to attend the funeral or other service, carefully explain beforehand what the body will look like, what a coffin is, how other people may be acting, and as many other details about the event as possible.</p>
<p>10. <i>Are there ways one can help a child say goodbye?</i></p>	<p>A child may need lots of time, sometimes even years, to understand the permanence of death and to say good-bye. The funeral or memorial service may be the occasion for taking the first step in the grieving process, but children also need concrete ways to say goodbye. Some ways to do this are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Plan an intimate memorial.</b> With your child, plan a smaller memorial gathering for close friends and family. Allow everyone to share memories and stories. It's OK to share funny memories and laughter.</li></ul>

<p>11. <i>When should you be concerned and seek professional help?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Dedicate a special moment.</b> Listen to or sing a favorite song or eat a favorite meal dedicated to the memory of your loved one.</li><li>• <b>Document memorabilia.</b> Gather your loved one’s pictures, clothes or favorite things. Then, take turns telling stories or writing about each item to remind all of you of the good times you shared. You could also record stories on your video camera or cell phone.</li><li>• <b>Plant a living memorial.</b> Working together to plant a garden bed of your loved one’s favorite flower or a tree in his or her honor can help you and your child connect with your loved one’s memory—and with one another.</li></ul> <p>It also helps to talk about the good relationship she had with the person who died: "Remember when you and Grandma went blueberry picking? She had so much fun with you."</p> <p>Babies and young child can also grieve to such an extent that nothing will calm them. In these cases they tend to cut themselves off from reality and withdraw from those</p>
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<p><i>12. Where can you go for this help?</i></p>	<p>who want to comfort and care for them. They very often struggle to cope with relationships; it is then that they need the constant and regular care, love and comfort of their parent/caregiver.</p> <p>When a child becomes detached, it can become a serious issue and the parent/caregiver needs to seek professional help. The behaviour of a detached baby or young child could include the following characteristics: showing no emotions at all; banging their head against their cot or the wall; rocking; excessive sucking; excessive masturbating and tantrums, etc. It could be any behaviour that the parent/caregiver recognises as unusual or abnormal for their baby or young child, i.e. behaviour the parent/caregiver has not seen before in their child.</p> <p>Childline is a good service that offers toll-free counseling, and can help parents and children dealing with grief. Otherwise make contact with your local social worker and ask for assistance or referrals to other services.</p>
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*13. It is really difficult talking to an adult who is grieving? I imagine it is also difficult to talk to children. Do you have any tips on how a caregiver can discuss grief with a young child?*

- Most importantly, talk to children about their feelings and don't be afraid to show them your feelings too. Children need to feel safe to confide in you, and to talk about their feelings, and these are ok.
- Before doing something that would result in a loss for a child (like moving house, divorce, changing schools etc), explain to children what is happening. For example when moving, explain that their family (or the child) is moving away to a new home, or town, etc. Talk about the change as though it is a great adventure and something to look forward to but also discuss that it might feel strange or be difficult too.
- Give young children the opportunity to talk about their sadness about leaving a place, friends, and other parents/caregivers, whatever the situation might be.
- In the case of a death in the family or a divorce, give children an opportunity to express how they feel, and once again try to encourage the child to find some

*14. Should we be talking about death with young children even if no-one has died?*

things to look forward to the forthcoming change.

- Talk with children about who in their family or circle of friends will be able to help them cope with the grief they are experiencing.
- Help young children make sense of their grief by drawing pictures with them and discussing what they draw.
- Refer the child to the clinic if their behaviour persists.

It's normal for your child to be curious about death, even if she hasn't yet lost a loved one. In fact, less emotionally fraught times are good opportunities for laying groundwork that will help your child cope when she *does* lose someone. Answer her questions about death, and don't be afraid to read stories about children whose pets or grandparents die.

**When your child asks questions about death, give brief, simple answers.** Young children can't handle too much information at once. At this age, it's most helpful to explain death in terms of physical functions that have ceased, rather than launching into a complicated discussion of a particular

	<p>illness: "Now that Uncle John has died, his body has stopped working. He can't walk or run, or eat or sleep or see anymore, and he doesn't feel any pain."</p> <p>It's also important to help a child understand basics such as who's going to take care of her. "She thinks, 'If Mom dies, who's going to give me my bath?'"</p>

### Learning outcomes

After listening to this show the audience should:

- Understand that the way babies and young children grieve is related to their age.
- Know the importance of being responsive and attentive to possible grief and bereavement that children are dealing with and act accordingly
- Understand the kind of difficult behaviour that grief can lead to.
- Know that detached children must be supported to reconnect and develop trusting relationships again
- Understand how to deal with grief and bereavement within the context of their community and culture.