

- They need fun activities. If you don't feel up to it you may be able to ask another adult to take them out or play with them. Talking during an activity is often easier for children and teenagers.
- Anger is part of grief too. Help your child find safe ways to express their anger (e.g. kicking a ball, riding a bike, banging in nails).
- Encourage participation in remembering activities such as making a memory box or book which include photos, drawings, birthday cards or some belongings of the person who died. Write down all their memories of the person (e.g. favourite foods, colours, sayings and things they did together). As a child grows up it will become harder for them to remember the person who died.
- Plant a tree or flowers.
- Decorate a candle to be lit on special occasions.

There are many books written for children on grief and loss, most libraries have a selection. There are also several websites with good information and resources such as [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz).

The Nurse Maude Family Support Service is available for grief and bereavement counselling for children and teenagers. To access this service please contact the Family Support Team.

## Nurse Maude Family Support

**Hospice Palliative Care Service**  
15 Mansfield Ave, PO Box 36126,  
Merivale, Christchurch  
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# Nurse Maude

**HOSPICE PALLIATIVE  
CARE SERVICE**

## Grief and Your Child or Teenager

## Te pāmamae me tāu tamaiti



Children and teenagers grieve in their own unique way. Their response will depend on their age, family and social situation, their personality, resilience and the support they receive.

Children often grieve in short bursts, appearing unconcerned one moment and very upset the next. The death of someone close is not something we get over but something we adjust to, and learn to live with over time. With each change or significant event, children and teenagers may understand the loss in a new or different way.

## Infants and Toddlers

Even very young children can be sensitive to major change in the family. Responses may include crying, increased clinginess, tantrums and irritability, changes in eating and sleeping patterns and searching for the person who has died.

Provide a consistent routine, give reassurance, affection and brief information. Play with them.

## Pre-schoolers

Children can believe they have caused the loss and usually grieve in intense but brief moments and may worry about their own safety. Responses may include those above and going back to younger ways of behaving such as bed wetting, thumb sucking, and fearing the dark.

Provide simple explanations, maintain a consistent routine and limits, give reassurance and cuddles.

## Primary School Age

At this age children are beginning to understand that death is final and may worry about their own death or

other peoples. They may see death as punishment for something they did. They like to know what happened and often ask blunt questions. Responses may include going back to younger ways of behaving, sleep problems, anger and destructive play, finding it hard to concentrate, quiet withdrawal, reluctance to go to school and fear of the dark.

Provide clear honest information, a consistent routine and structure with some flexibility. Let them know they are loved and cared for and provide opportunities for them to express their feelings such as drawing, music and physical activities.

## Intermediate School Age

Children at this stage understand death is final and are beginning to look for support from friends. They are often concerned about how their family will be in the future. Responses may include moodiness, irritability, anger, argumentativeness, withdrawal and changing sleeping patterns.

Provide support and acceptance, maintain boundaries with flexibility. Talk with them, acknowledge the loss and allow them time with friends.

## Teenagers

Teenagers are often caught between their wish to be independent and their need for comfort and security. They usually want to fit in with their friends but after a death they may find this difficult.

Responses may include withdrawal from family and friends, trouble concentrating, taking risks, pushing limits, crying secretly, changes to eating and sleeping patterns, trying to protect others, and changing peer group.

Let them grieve in their own way and in their own time. Reassure them they have the resources to cope with the pain and distress. Provide encouragement to express their feelings, accept their mood swings and include them in decision making. Allow them time alone and time with their friends.

## Support for Children and Teenagers after a Death

- Give as much information as they can understand. You may need to repeat it many times. Encourage questions which might include “What happened?” “What caused it?” “Why did it happen?” “Is it my fault?” “Are we/am I going to be okay?”
- Don’t withhold information or they may become resentful and distrusting if they find out from other sources. Sometimes children won’t ask questions or talk about how they are feeling if they think it will upset or distress you. Let them know that it is okay to get upset when you are grieving.
- Children and teenagers will take their cues from you. They often model their grieving on how they see you grieving and looking after yourself.
- Don’t use euphemisms like “gone to sleep” as children can become afraid of you or them going to sleep.
- Tell your children they are loved and safe and give them information about who is around to care for them.
- Grieving children need attention, praise and encouragement. Hugs and physical touch can be very reassuring.