

# Life cycle

It's never easy dealing with death, but the loss of a loved one will be a fact of life for most of us. Managing grief with children is important for their mental wellbeing, both immediately following the loss and for the future. This month, **Carol Duncan** and **Chris Howe** share two moving stories about how they handled a death in the family.



## EXPERT OPINION

Grief in children is expressed in many different ways, but there are strategies to help them manage their emotions. The following is an edited extract from *Grief and Loss*, an article on the Parent Link website. Visit [www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)

**Young children especially don't have the words to talk about their feelings in the way that adults do. Some of the ways they show grief may be:**

- Physical pain such as stomach aches or headaches
- Sleeping problems, bad dreams
- Being destructive
- Acting like a younger child
- Anger or aggression to friends, parents or toys
- Not wanting to separate, clinginess, wanting to be near adults

### Professional help is needed if a child:

- Talks of not wanting to live or being better off dead
- Seems to be preoccupied with dying
- Is unable to concentrate and is withdrawn at school months later
- Is crying, sad or depressed much of the time
- Is not wanting to join in or play with other children months later.

### What parents can do:

- Provide a safe environment where your child feels able to express feelings in whatever way he can. Help him to find ways to show his feelings through play, water play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting or drawing.
- Give clear and truthful information to children in a way that they can understand. Don't forget that children need to know what is happening even if they don't ask.

## JOIN THE DISCUSSION!

Have you discussed death with your child or had to help them deal with grief after a loss? Visit [www.sunnydaysmagazine.com.au](http://www.sunnydaysmagazine.com.au) and join the discussion.



## mum said...

When I came home from the hospital that afternoon, the first thing I did was kneel on the kitchen floor with my boys, "The doctors

couldn't help Grandma - she was just too sick and they couldn't fix her."

My mother died on Boxing Day, 2007, after collapsing from a massive stroke that I don't think she ever had a chance of recovering from. My sons were then four and six. Mr 4 was actually with mum when she collapsed. I heard him saying, "Wake up, Grandma. Wake UP!" My husband and I started first aid on my mum while we waited for the ambulance and then I accompanied her to hospital, ultimately asking the doctors to stop resuscitating her. In the three years since, I've come to decide that there isn't a 'better way' to lose someone. A sudden death is shocking and traumatic, but a slow death to illness deals its own trauma.

Every family will have decisions to make, eventually, about dealing with death of a loved one and explaining it to children. And every family will do it differently, hoping, desperately, that they are doing the 'right' thing.

For us, the right thing was to be totally honest about what happened to Grandma, to explain everything, answer questions, and to talk about her. Which we still do. The kids miss her, of course, but they talk about her with love and humour, and this means they are creating beautiful memories of a woman they probably won't really remember.

There were four paramedics at the house that day and I will be forever grateful that one of them took a couple of minutes to gently tell the boys that Grandma was being looked after. Not that she'd be OK, but that they were caring for her. He also said, "Your Grandma is so proud of you for taking care of her when she got sick. You did a wonderful job looking after her until we got here." That is a message I've repeated numerous times: that Grandma would be so proud of them.

We are also blessed with a 90-year-old Russian grandmother in this family

- my husband's grandmother and great-grandmother to my children. They are seeing her age, they understand life and death (as much as children can), and they know that Babushka will not be here for too many more years. They acknowledge that it will be sad when she dies.

We've tried to be honest with them, so they know many things. They know their Grandma was funny, a great cook and wonderful knitter. They know that she loved finding truly disgusting toys to give them as gifts (and if the toys made a fart noise she was on a winner), they know she played violin when she was a little girl and now they play too. But, most importantly, they know, without a doubt, that Grandma loved them.

**Carol is a journalist and presenter with ABC Local radio in Newcastle. She is the mother of two boys - Alexander, 9, and James 7 - and claims to have no idea what she'd have done had she had a 'pink one', but assumes that even dainty girl-children do armpit farts. She loves bedtime.**



## dad said...

In 2008, a week before Bethany was born, her twin brother, Alfred, died. Originally, we planned not to tell our three-year-old daughter

until after Bethany and her brother were born. However, that plan was, in hindsight, doomed to failure.

Jas was so keen to have a brother and sister. So much that she mentioned them almost every day and proudly told everyone we met. So, the afternoon after Fred's death, when Jas began her usual, 'When my brother and sister are born, I'm going to...' comments I looked at my wife and we silently agreed to tell Jas immediately. There was no way either of us could keep up the facade. My wife left the room. I sat Jas down on my knee and told her that her brother had died and that Mum would only be bringing home her sister from the hospital.

She was pretty upset.

Looking back, Jas did cope incredibly well. It was her first encounter with death, and

a pretty sharp one. My wife and I made a pact that we'd never shush her when she wanted to discuss Alfred, or death in general. Sure, it made things uncomfortable for a while. Jas kept mentioning it at dinner when she didn't want to eat her food - she knew it was a change-the-topic topic. And whenever anyone innocently asked Jas how many brothers and sisters she had, she'd respond, "I have a sister and a dead brother". Perhaps a little more worrying was the fact that every time anyone got sick, Jas asked, apprehensively, if they were going to die. And sometimes she would wonder if her brother was simply delayed - maybe he'd just gotten lost and would arrive later?

When my wife fell pregnant recently with twins, (a boy and a girl, due in May) Jas was, and still remains, the only completely unabashed, enthusiastic greeter of the news. Everyone else, including ourselves said, "Twins? Four kids? Oh... congratulations," whereas Jas screamed a surprising, bring-a-smile-to-your-face "Yay!" followed by running in circles yelling about twins and repeating all the options: 'two boys!' or 'two girls!' or 'boy and a girl!' over and over.

Later, she did show a little extra anxiety. Would her brother die again? she asked. Would he get sick? We explained that what

happened to Fred was a one-off and then took her to a few ultrasounds. The sound of her brother and sister's heartbeat, and their image on the screen was a tremendous help.

I guess things could have been much, much worse. Except for the above examples, Jas' behaviour didn't really change. At no stage have we considered additional assistance from, say, a doctor or a child psychologist.

Jas obviously understood what happened to Fred and just as obviously thought about it a lot. I hope that the parenting decision we made to acknowledge Fred's loss and give Jas the complete freedom to speak her mind helped her work it through. Perhaps the everlasting 'Dad' observation of "better out than in" applies here as well. Jas coped, and she remains a bright, outgoing and positive child. For that, I'm thankful.

**Chris is a dad who didn't know what the meaning of life was until he had kids. He then realised it was too sleep, but it was too late. With two daughters (aged 5 and 2), and twins on the way, idleness isn't an option for few years to come.**