



Traumatic Grief

In Ireland today, there are babies, toddlers and young children growing up in households impacted by poverty, homelessness, neighbourhood violence, discrimination, addiction, mental health problems, traumatic grief and domestic violence, and some children are being subjected to chronic neglect and/or abuse.

Working in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings, we have seen first-hand the devastating impact that traumatic experiences such as these can have on the lives of the youngest and most vulnerable people in our society. For many children, the impact of adverse experiences will negatively affect their wellbeing and development, leading to poor outcomes and social, emotional and physical issues over the course of their lives.

As early years educators, we can play a critical role in supporting children and families by promoting a safe, supportive environment, and providing stable, caring relationships in those critical first years of life. Through our intimate relationships with young children and their families we have the opportunity to make a real, positive difference.

This resource, which is one in a series looking at how ELC settings can support children experiencing adversity, focuses on children experiencing traumatic grief following the death of someone close to them. It explores how bereavement can result in traumatic grief for children, how to recognise trauma symptoms in children in response to a bereavement, and how, as early years educators, in partnership with families and specialist bereavement or mental health services, can support children to recover from traumatic grief.

Childhood Trauma and Adversity

Childhood trauma can be defined as, 'An actual or perceived danger that undermines a child's sense of physical or emotional safety or poses a threat to the safety of the child's parents or caregivers, overwhelms their coping ability, and impacts their functioning and development' (Nicholson et al, 2018, p.viii).

Children who experience strong, frequent and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support are vulnerable to what is called toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child, 2007). Toxic stress experienced early in childhood takes a toll on a person's physical and mental health, and can seriously impact children across a range of different developmental domains (Byrne, 2022). This has lasting adverse effects on wellbeing, and increases the likelihood of physical, psychological and behavioural problems later in life (Felitti et al., 1998).

When children have the consistent caring support of at least one parent or caregiver who responds appropriately to their needs and acts as a buffer against stress, however, they are more likely to recover from frightening experiences and any potential lasting impacts on their health, wellbeing and life opportunities from the damaging effects of stress will be lessened.

Behaviour We Might See in a Child Experiencing Trauma

When young children experience traumatic events, they do not always have the words to talk about what has happened to them or how they feel, instead communicating their distress through their behaviour. Children experiencing toxic stress have a stress response system that is set to high alert, leaving them overly sensitive to triggers or trauma reminders. This means that they can experience the world as inherently dangerous even in safe situations. Children might present in a constant state of hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hypoarousal (withdrawal or shut-down).

Behaviours that might be observed in traumatised young children include (NCTSN, 2008):

- Separation anxiety or clinginess towards educators or primary caregivers
- Regression in previously mastered stages of development (e.g. baby talk or toileting accidents)
- Re-creating the traumatic event (e.g. repeatedly talking about, 'playing' out, or drawing the event)
- Difficulty at naptime (e.g. avoiding sleep, waking up, or nightmares)
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches)
- Changes in behaviour (e.g. appetite, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, bright lights, sudden movements, or loud sounds
- Increased distress (e.g. crying, unusually whiny, irritable)
- Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- Worry about recurrence of the traumatic event
- New fears (e.g. fear of the dark or monsters)
- Statements and questions about death and dying

Young Children and Grief

Death is an inevitable part of life and grief is a normal and natural reaction to the loss of a significant person in our lives. For all children, the loss of an attachment figure, such as a parent, or another loved one or important figure in their life, such as a grandparent or sibling, will have an impact. Grief does not spare babies, toddlers and young children, they can grieve just as deeply as adults, although the way they express their grief will be different.

As early years educators, we cannot take away the grief and loss that inevitably comes with the death of someone important in a child's life but we can play an important role in supporting the child and their family through this difficult time. This can decrease the likelihood of social, emotional and behavioural problems for the child that can persist beyond childhood.

How children process grief

Children will have a range of different feelings, thoughts and behaviours, and different responses to the death of a loved one. Some children may appear very quiet and withdrawn, while others may appear to be anxious and on high alert. Some children might regress in their development. Children might worry about the health of other family members or they might believe that they were some way to blame for the death of their loved one. Younger children might not understand the finality of death and might think the person who has died will be back. These are all expected and normal responses for children who have lost a person close to them.



Children's ability to process grief is influenced by various factors, such as their age and the level of understanding of death. William Worden (2018) developed the concept of the 'tasks of mourning' to describe the process people go through when adapting to loss. These tasks are:

1. Accept the reality of the loss
2. Process the pain of grief
3. Adjust to a world without the person who has died
4. Find a way to stay connected to the person who has died while moving forward in life

Most children will, over time and with the support of the people around them, adapt and recover from the loss of a loved one. For some children, however, trauma gets in the way of their ability to process the grief and stops them from being able to adapt and recover from their loss.

Childhood Traumatic Grief

Childhood traumatic grief occurs when children develop significant trauma symptoms related to the death of a loved one, and this obstructs their ability to navigate the normal grieving process. These children are unable to accomplish the tasks of mourning outlined above. The traumatic stress responses of children experiencing traumatic grief interfere with their ability to adequately mourn the loss and recover (Cohen et al., 2002). They will experience more serious distress and difficulties than the typical grieving process brings and will need more help to recover.

Traumatic grief can happen when a child has lost a loved one in circumstances that they have experienced as traumatic. This might be following a sudden and traumatic death such as in the case of homicide, suicide or a car accident, or in the event of an unexpected health condition such as a heart attack. For example, a child who was present when their mother was killed might not be able to even think about their mother without being reminded of the terrifying and traumatic circumstances of their death. This will impact on their ability to accept their loss, work through those difficult emotions and adapt to a life without their mother.

Traumatic grief can also happen in cases where the death is a result of natural causes or terminal illnesses, particularly if the child was frightened by the death or witnessed scary medical procedures taking place.

Given a parent's important role as primary caregiver, the loss of a parent may be a traumatic event for children regardless of the type of loss, as it can trigger feelings of perceived threat, fearfulness and helplessness, particularly in the case of younger children (Searles McClatchy et al., 2009).



Children who experience traumatic grief can be triggered by reminders of the death itself, for example, the sound of an ambulance siren. They may be triggered by reminders of the loss of the person such as seeing photos of their deceased loved one. They may also be triggered by reminders of the changes that have happened in their life as a result of the death such as having to move house (Cohen & Mannarino, 2004). For some children, even thinking about happy times with the person they lost can set off distressing reminders of the frightening way the person died.

Signs That a Child is Experiencing Traumatic Grief

Often we cannot be sure if a child is grieving or if they are experiencing trauma associated with the death of a loved one. When we say someone is grieving, this can often be described in terms of feelings of deep sadness. When we say someone is experiencing trauma this means that as well as feeling sad, they feel scared, unsafe, threatened and powerless (Steele & Cuban, 2013).

For most children, as they come to understand the death of someone close to them and how they feel about it, the intensity and frequency of difficult emotions reduce and they learn to live with their loss (UK Trauma Council, 2021). Traumatic grief causes difficulties for children with regulating emotions, behaviours and engaging in healthy relationships. If we only try to address children's grief, we may miss the symptoms of trauma and the opportunity to help them recover.

Grief related traumatic stress reactions may include the following (NCTSN, 2008):

- Children having ongoing intrusive memories about the death which show up as upsetting thoughts, images, nightmares, or play about the frightening way the person died.
- Children presenting with physical or somatic distress such as headaches, stomach aches, loss of appetite, symptoms mimicking the way the deceased died, difficulty sleeping.
- Children showing signs of avoidance such as withdrawal, acting as if not upset about the death, or avoiding reminders of the person, the way the person died, places or things related to the person, or events that led to the death.
- Children experiencing emotional distress such as feelings of anger, guilt, shame, self-blame and loss of trust, believing the world is unsafe.
- Children may view their separation from their loved one as abandonment and experience separation anxiety causing them to be clingy and very distressed by separation from their caregivers.
- Children demonstrating increased arousal such as irritability, trouble sleeping, decreased concentration, high activity levels, increased vigilance, fears about safety of oneself or others, hurting themselves and others.

Additional Risk Factors for Traumatic Grief

In some situations, there can be social stigmas attached to a person's death such as in the case of suicide, substance abuse related death or gangland related violence. This can mean that these children and their families don't receive the same outpouring of support from the community.

Following the death of a loved one, children and their families may experience additional adversities such as loss of the family home or reduced income. These additional losses create extra stressors for families who are already trying to cope with the death of a family member.

Some children will already be experiencing early adversity prior to the death of their loved one. This might include experiences of abuse and/or neglect, or growing up in a household where there are mental health problems, addiction, or domestic violence. Children who are already living lives impacted by trauma and adversity will be more susceptible to developing traumatic grief reactions (NCTSN, 2008).

Supporting Children with Traumatic Grief

Provide security and reassurance

Relationships are the most important influence on a child's psychological wellbeing. When babies, toddlers and young children experience the loss of a primary caregiver it disrupts their attachment and can be devastating to a young child's foundational experience of safety and security. This is especially the case when they don't have the developmental capacity to understand the absence of their loved one and the child doesn't have access to another consistent, nurturing and attuned adult caregiver in their life.

To buffer the impact of traumatic grief, children will benefit from the availability of trusted, sensitive and caring adults in their lives.

As early years educators, we can offer children the opportunity to form secondary attachments that promote children's social and emotional wellbeing. Stay close to the child and connect with them often throughout the day. This will help reassure children that they are safe. When we give children the message 'I see you, I hear you, you are important', this creates a sense of security. It is common for children who are experiencing traumatic grief to have separation anxiety and they need to know that we are committed to them and will be with them and take care of them during their time in the setting.



Be available at arrival time to greet and welcome the child as, following a bereavement, children who previously settled quickly might now find it difficult and distressing to separate from their caregivers. It is a good idea to plan for these separations ahead of time. If possible, ensure a gradual separation between the child and family member by slowly increasing the length of separations as the child becomes more settled in the setting. Encourage family members to stay with their child in the setting and support them to do so.



Encourage children to talk

Sometimes adults, with the best of intentions, will avoid talking with young children about death, fearing it will upset them. Not talking about what has occurred can make the death more frightening and confusing for children as they may feel that it is too bad to talk about or they may use their imagination to try to fill in the missing information on the circumstances of the death.

By openly discussing the loss, we create a supportive environment where the child feels safe to express their feelings and concerns, and this will help them to cope with their grief.

It is important that we let the child know that we are aware of the death of their loved one. This will foster trust and reassurance, and help the child to know that they are not alone. Speak to the child's parents to find out what the child already knows about the death and what they are comfortable with you saying to the child. If parents don't want it discussed, acknowledge how difficult it must be for them and be sensitive to their grief. Share with them how beneficial it will be to the child to discuss the loss and the person who has died.

Young children will need help making sense of what happened. Try to give developmentally appropriate information without overwhelming them. Children will process as much information as they can – it is important that they can return and ask for more information when they are ready or are feeling confused. Think about the words used when talking with children about death. Using terms like ‘passed away’ or ‘lost’ when speaking of a death can lead to confusion for some children. Children might ask for explanations about how a person can be in the ground, in heaven and in their heart all at the same time. They may also ask the same questions over and over again.

Provide familiarity and routine

Early Learning and Care settings are important places to foster a sense of safety for children. After the death of a loved one, children’s home environments may feel unfamiliar and chaotic at times. The familiarity and routine of attending their ELC setting can provide much comfort to distressed children.

Bereavement can change the way a child sees the world, making it seem a scary and dangerous place. Maintaining consistent and predictable daily routines within the setting that children experience as familiar and dependable helps to provide a sense of security and safety. Be particularly sensitive to transition times, especially arrival and departure times, and unexpected changes such as staff absences. Unexpected change can be stressful and children might need extra support. Some children will have comfort items from home that help to calm and soothe them and these should be easily accessible.

Co-regulate with the child

When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it’s our job to share our calm, not join their chaos. – L.R. Knost

When children are feeling stressed or anxious, they may struggle to manage the intensity and duration of their emotions, resulting in them becoming easily overwhelmed and dysregulated. They may struggle to self-regulate, not only on an emotional level but also on a physiological level. As described earlier, experiences of traumatic grief will trigger a range of different feelings, thoughts and behaviours in children, and they will need help to stay calm and regulated.

Through the relationship we have with children, we engage in a process called co-regulation, which means that we organise their feelings, offer them strategies to help them manage their big emotions and behaviours, and support them to feel calm and regulated. When children are feeling calm and regulated, encourage them to practise some coping skills such as taking deep breaths, engaging in sensory activities, snuggling a soft toy or asking for a hug, and help them to use these strategies during their times of stress. We should aim to stay close to children who become easily dysregulated so we can notice quickly if they are becoming dysregulated and respond appropriately, supporting them to stay calm.

Through co-regulation, children learn that it is ok to have big feelings and that we will be there to comfort and soothe their emotional distress.

Provide for play

Play can help children cope by providing a medium where they can work through their thoughts, experiences and feelings and help them make sense of their experiences (Byrne, 2022). Provide ample opportunities for children to play and stay close by to watch out for signs of distress and to offer support when needed. Consider what activities the child enjoys engaging with, those activities that you notice foster positive emotions in the child such as joy, interest, happiness and humour and plan around these.



Spend time outside as outdoor play offers children many opportunities to regulate through gross motor movements like swinging, climbing and hanging from monkey bars.

Think about the environment

The physical environment can make a big difference to how children feel in a space. It can help children feel safe and welcome or it can have the opposite effect and trigger feelings of anxiety, fear and danger.

Provide a low arousal environment, considering the number of people in the room, lighting, noise, tone of voice etc. Provide natural spaces in the environment as being around nature improves wellbeing and helps children to feel calmer.

Create calm, cosy spaces where children can go to take a break away when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed or are not able to focus on activities or listen to others. Include objects that support regulation such as cushions, blankets, soft toys, mind jars and sensory materials. Ensure children have ongoing access to a wide range of activities and materials that they find calming and regulating such as art, music, storytelling and books. Provide materials that support imaginative play such as open-ended materials and toys like blocks and wooden dolls, which children can use to express what they need. The more open-ended their toys are, the more opportunities children will have to play out and talk through their thoughts, fears and concerns.

Offer choice and control

Following the death of a loved one, children can feel like they have little or no control over their lives. To help children to develop a sense of agency in their lives, provide them with many opportunities to exercise choice and control throughout the day.

Adopt a strengths-based approach

Adopt a strengths-based approach, which believes in the ability of children to heal and recover from traumatic events such as the death of a loved one. Make time to share good news and talk about positive stories from children and families' lives, such as family outings and acts of kindness.

Supporting Families

We know that a child's relationship with their parents or primary caregivers is their most significant and that this relationship greatly influences a child's psychological wellbeing. We also know that when parents are stressed, this impacts on their parenting behaviours.

In ELC settings, we need to consider ways to appropriately support families in their role. Following the death of an important person in a child's life, family members who are in a caregiving role might be feeling like they don't know what to do. Parents and caregivers may be traumatised and preoccupied themselves following the death, and some may think that their child is not affected by the death. In some circumstances they might be feeling the strain of parenting alone. Parents/caregivers may be left feeling powerless with limited control over their lives. For this reason, it is especially important that you work in partnership with parents/caregivers in a consistent, respectful and meaningful way.

- Take action early on, so parents/caregivers know you take the grief seriously and you want to support their child. This will also help scaffold parents'/caregivers' coping skills during this difficult time.
- Ask the child's parents/caregivers to share with you how the death was explained to the child, what the child has witnessed and how they have been responding to the death.
- Take into account how the child's family culture or belief systems influence the way death is understood and responded to. This understanding can help us be more sensitive in how we support families and might provide insights into the child's experience of the loss.
- Check in with the child's parents/caregivers about what to share about the death with other children and their families in the setting.
- Offer practical support such as flexible hours and easy access to information.
- Work in partnership with parents/caregivers to agree a plan to support their child following the bereavement. Check in regularly with the child's parents/caregivers to discuss any concerns or to share queries, observations and positive feedback.
- Document children's experiences in the setting with photos of them at play, records of their interests and learning stories, and reflect on them often with children and their parents/caregivers. These will provide concrete evidence of how children are adapting.

If you have enough information to believe that a child is displaying signs of traumatic grief and these symptoms are persisting, this child will benefit from professional support. Discuss this with the child's parents and advise parents to access professional bereavement supports for their child and for themselves if needed.





Our Own Wellbeing

Our ability to respond appropriately to children experiencing traumatic grief requires presence, sensitivity and empathy, and it can be easy to become tired, stressed and overwhelmed ourselves at times. There is a cost to caring and any professional who works with traumatised children is vulnerable to the effects of trauma (Figley, 1995). We will not be able to support children's emotional wellbeing if our own emotional needs are not being met. It is important that we recognise signs that we are becoming stressed in our work and seek support from colleagues and from the management in our setting. We can also actively engage in the self-care practices we find restorative, whether that is yoga, creative activities or spending time with supportive people. It is important to access professional supports should they be needed.

All early years educators will benefit from accessing information, guidance and mentoring support to help us in our role supporting children.

When a young child experiences traumatic grief they feel overwhelmed by their emotions and this can have serious consequences on their physical and psychological wellbeing. Without adequate supports, these effects can be lasting. While most children who lose a loved one do not go on to develop traumatic grief, it is important those who do are identified and access specialist supports.

As early years educators, we play a critical and ongoing role for children and families to buffer the impact of trauma and support the child and their family to recover and thrive.

Further Supports

Working in partnership with other professionals and agencies is key to ensuring children and their families get the right supports when they need them. Identify the bereavement and family support services available in your local area and build working relationships with these services so that you can call on them when you need them.

Click on the links below for information.

Bereavement supports

[Barnardos – bereavement service](#)

[Young Children Grieve Too: A Guide for Parents and Carers of Children Under 6 Who Have Been Bereaved](#)

[Mind the Gap: A Guide for Parents and Carers of Bereaved School Age Children and Young People](#)

[Irish Hospice Foundation](#)

[Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#)

[Support After Traumatic Death in the Community](#)

Other supports

[The Key Person Approach: Positive Relationships with Children in the Early Years](#)

[Creative Mindfulness](#)

[Mindfulness in Early Learning and Care](#)

[Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event](#)

[Staff Wellbeing in Early Learning and Care](#)

[Trauma and Young Children: Building Trauma Awareness in Early Learning and Care](#)



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