

Ages 8–12

Children may start to internalise their feelings and express fear or anger through noticeable changes in behaviour. Many begin to worry about who will take care of them during this time. Ongoing reassurance, routine, and opportunities to talk are important.

Ages 13 and up

Adolescents generally understand the full meaning of illness and death. They often rely on peers and social outlets for support and may experience heightened anxiety, intense sadness, or withdrawal. Some may struggle to manage their emotions, question the meaning of life, or show risk-taking behaviours. Continued adult guidance, support, and connection remain essential.

Activity Ideas

Tangible, hands-on ways to capture memories and express emotions can be very helpful for children. These activities allow them to connect, create, and share feelings in ways that feel natural and safe. Some activity ideas include:

- Creating a picture using everyone's fingerprints
- Using a special journal to write or draw thoughts and feelings
- Drawing pictures of happy or fun memories
- Pressing thumbprints into bakeable clay as a keepsake

- Making matching bracelets using wool or embroidery thread in favourite colours
- Creating a photo journal of significant moments in their lives
- Talking together about fun and meaningful memories
- Spending time with their loved one through shared activities such as baking or playing cards.

A helpful resource for supporting children through grief is Skylight, which offers information, guidance, and practical tools for children, young people, and their whānau. Visit: skylight.org.nz

We understand that this may be a very difficult time for you and your whānau. Our Patient and Whānau Support Team is here to support you in whatever way feels right for you.

We respect that not everyone chooses to use our services; however, if you would like further information or simply to have a chat, please don't hesitate to contact us.



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Supporting Children Through Anticipatory Grief



Anticipatory grief and children

If you are worried about talking to your children about death and loss, you are not alone. Many parents and caregivers feel unsure about how to begin these conversations. We have put together some guidance to help support you.

Anticipatory grief is the grieving that happens before a loss occurs. It often brings a wide mix of emotions, such as hope, sadness, anger, and denial, and can feel more complex and unpredictable than grief after a death. Children may move in and out of difficult emotions more quickly than adults — this is a natural way for them to manage strong feelings in smaller, more manageable doses.

It is important to talk with children about illness and dying. Through these conversations, you can learn what your child understands and where there may be misunderstandings, fears, or worries. Open discussion allows you to offer reassurance, comfort, and age-appropriate information.

What we say to children will depend on their developmental stage, life experiences, and whānau beliefs. Whānau can encourage communication by showing interest in and respect for what children share. Being open and honest helps children feel less confused and more supported, and makes it easier for them to talk about their feelings as things change.

Be led by your child

Follow your child's lead and provide as much information as they are asking for. While it is natural to want to protect children from difficult truths, most children can cope with honest information when it is shared in a sensitive and age-appropriate way.

When someone they love is dying from an illness, use clear and honest language. This helps children understand what is happening and prepares them in their own way for what lies ahead. Without clear information, children may blame themselves or misunderstand the situation. Using correct terms can help them recognise the difference between common illnesses, such as coughs or colds, and illnesses that can lead to death.

Whenever possible, choose a quiet or familiar place to talk without interruptions. Going for a walk or having a conversation during a car ride can sometimes make these discussions feel easier and more natural.

Emotional processing

Children often express and process emotions physically. Strong emotions may show up as stomach aches, headaches, nausea, or increased restlessness and activity.

Physical movement can be very helpful in releasing these emotions. Activities such as bike riding, playing sport, kicking a ball, or gentle rough-and-tumble play can support emotional regulation and wellbeing.

Young children often wonder

Did I cause the illness to happen?
Will this happen to me?
Who will take care of me?

Ages and stages

Reassurance through cuddles and physical closeness is important at all ages.

Birth to 2 years

Children at this age are unable to understand the concept of impending death, but they do sense loss and changes around them. They are very sensitive to the emotions of others and may show changes in eating, sleeping, or toileting.

Ages 3–5

For young children, whānau is the centre of their world. They may begin to understand the idea of death, but often do not recognise that it is permanent. Death may be seen as temporary or reversible. Magical thinking and regressive behaviours are common. Play is an important way for children at this age to process feelings.

Ages 5–8

Children in this age group begin to understand that death is final. They may feel a sense of responsibility for the illness or worry that it is contagious. Concerns that another whānau member might become sick are common. Reassurance and clear information are very helpful.

