

Waltham Forest Early Years Guidance

Supporting Young Children's Well-Being

This guidance supports early years practitioners to identify children who might be experiencing grief and offers ideas on how to best support the emotional well-being of children in their care.

Children need to feel safe and secure.

As keen observers of people and environments, babies and children notice and react to stress from parents and caregivers around them. When a child's basic needs are met, when they feel listened to and valued, enjoy warm loving relationships they will more likely cope with life's adversities.



Separation anxiety

Separating from a parent or carer after lengthy time at home may cause high levels of stress and grief for some children and they may need additional time and support to cope with the settling in process.

Bereavement

Not all children behave in the same way when they are experiencing grief and bereavement. For practitioners it is about watching closely, creating safe emotional spaces and being responsive to differing emotions that a child may display.

Recognising common symptoms of grief

Young children do not have the language skills to express how they feel. Instead, they show us the emotions with which they are dealing with through their behavior.

Common symptoms can include:

- Change in usual behaviours. Look for little changes e.g. a quiet child is now loud and chatty (they could be putting on a brave front) or the loud, chatty child is now quiet and withdrawn.
- Withdrawn, not engaging with the environment, adults or peers
- Irritably, lack of concentration, clingy, behaves aggressively hurting themselves or others
- Demanding extra attention
- Difficulty with selfcare, sleeping, eating and toileting
- Regression to an earlier stage of development
- Hidden grief symptoms can include unexplained pain, tummy aches, racing heart beats



Photo credit: Eric Aydin-Barberini

Attachment and the key person

The key person, offering consistent, sensitive care and quality time, plays a vital role in supporting a child cope with their feelings. When a child experiences low levels of well-being, their ability to focus, explore, create, have fun, develop relationships, make friends and feel good about themselves is compromised.



- Develop strong relationships with parents/carers. Children feel a sense of belonging and safety in the setting when their parents are also involved.
- Work with parents to identify where there has been a bereavement or who may need extra support with settling in.
- Allow time for children and their parents /carers to familiarise themselves with their new environments.
- As a team, identify families who may need extra support during this time. Talk to the families, ask if there has been changes at home, has there been any changes in behaviour, emotions or attitudes?

Recommendations

- Create an emotionally safe space by offering consistency, routines and reassurance. Where a child is managing a major change in their life, ensure time in the setting is familiar and predictable.
- Watch and listen closely, notice behavioural changes throughout the day and reflect with your team on what you have observed.
- Be emphatic. Use your experiences to name and identify feeling words e.g. 'I remember when I was feeling sad when my grandfather died. I was getting a tummy ache. Does that sound a little like what you are feeling?'
- Acknowledging feelings and emotions signals that it is okay to feel like this.
- Offer puppets and dolls in the role play area for children to use to express themselves and use puppets to explore different feelings with individual children or in small groups.
- Validate feelings by saying e.g. 'I can see you are upset that mummy has gone. She will be back later. I am here for you now'.



Do families need a referral to [Early Help](#) or signposting to the [Family Hubs](#)?

Be aware that feelings can emerge at any point in time.

Know that quality attachment makes the difference.

This guidance is followed by a recorded webinar offering schools and settings a deeper exploration of how best to support young children who are experiencing grief and low levels of well-being.