



Government of Western Australia
Child and Adolescent Health Service



Perth Children's Hospital

Bereavement after the loss of a child to sepsis

Our heartfelt condolences go out to you and your loved ones during this difficult time

Perth Children's Hospital Sepsis Program



Grief

Losing a loved one to sepsis can happen suddenly and without warning.

The experience of witnessing a loved one become unwell and pass away, often suddenly, can be deeply distressing, traumatic, and overwhelming. It is a situation that often leaves those left behind with many questions and a need for answers.

Losing a child, no matter what age, makes your heart break in places you never knew existed.

Grief responses

- Shock and numbness
- Overwhelming pain and sadness
- Searching for the person who has died, wondering ‘where could they be?’
- Repeatedly replaying and reflecting on the events as they unfolded
- Parents and loved ones questioning whether they could or should have done anything differently
- Guilt about the nature or circumstances of the loss or the relationship with the deceased
- Loneliness, isolation, and hopelessness
- Feelings of anger – towards the deceased, other loved ones, or the universe in general
- Agitation, insomnia, or extreme fatigue and oversleeping
- Resorting to unhelpful coping strategies, such as alcohol or drug use

Dealing with grief

An unexpected death can be shocking and traumatic. It is natural for people to try to make sense of what has happened. Families and loved ones often have questions and may feel frustrated when answers are unavailable. However, sometimes there are no answers.

Self-care for grieving families and loved ones

- **Take time** – grief is a painful and highly individual process with no set timeframe. Be kind and gentle with yourself, recognising that grief may last months or years, and some days will be harder than others.
- **Acknowledge feelings** – allow yourself to feel and process your emotions. Triggers may bring up difficult feelings or memories, which is a natural part of grieving.
- **Rest and nutrition** – grieving consumes significant energy. Ensure you get enough rest, eat well, and stay hydrated.
- **Engage in physical activity** – gentle, mindful exercises such as yoga, swimming, or walking can help relieve stress, anxiety, and physical symptoms of grief.
- **Take time off** – compassionate leave from work may be necessary to focus on healing. Give yourself permission to step back if needed.
- **Seek support** – lean on family and friends for emotional support. Gradually, this support can help you find ways to adjust to life after loss.
- **Professional help** – consider counselling, therapy, or support groups, especially if the circumstances of the death were traumatic or if grief is overwhelming. Seeking professional help is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- **Reach out for information** – for support and resources about sepsis, contact the CAHS Sepsis Program at pch.sepsis@health.wa.gov.au.

Grief is a deeply personal journey.

Remember, healing takes time, and it's okay to seek help and support along the way.



Siblings

Talking about death can help children understand, accept, and cope with the loss of their sibling.

How children feel and react when a sibling dies

When a sibling dies, children may experience a wide range of emotions and reactions. They may worry about losing other family members or fear for their own safety. They may also wonder how the loss will change them or their family dynamic.

Children's reactions can vary depending on their age and developmental stage:

- **Young children** might cry, have tantrums, withdraw from others, or act as if their sibling hasn't died. They may also ask repeatedly when their sibling is coming home.
- **Preschoolers** may regress, such as reverting to baby talk or losing previously acquired skills.
- **School-age children** may struggle with schoolwork, withdraw from friends, or have difficulty expressing their emotions.

Children often ask many questions, turning to family members, school friends, or trusted adults for answers and support.

Grief may also affect a child's physical and mental health. They might experience:

- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach-aches
- Changes in appetite
- Anxiety or increased fears
- Disrupted sleep patterns, including nightmares

After a sudden death, children may appear shocked rather than sad because they had no time to prepare or say goodbye. Some children may seem unaffected, which is common when they struggle to process their loss or internalise their feelings.

Talking with children about the death of a sibling

It is important for parents to tell their child as soon as possible that their sibling has died. Hearing this directly from parents provides clarity and prevents confusion from second-hand information.

By talking openly about the death, parents can help their child:

- Understand, accept, and cope with the loss
- Learn that it's okay to talk about death
- Express difficult emotions in a safe, supportive environment

This approach fosters openness, reassures children, and can help them feel secure during a challenging time.

What do bereaved children need?

Bereaved children need ongoing attention, reassurance, and support. It's not unusual for grief to resurface months or even years later, especially as children reach new milestones or significant life events.

Key considerations for supporting bereaved children include:

- **Acknowledging grief's timeline** – grief has no set timetable. Each child processes loss differently, and their emotions may fluctuate over time.
- **Creating family rituals** – meaningful events or anniversaries can help children process their grief and honour their sibling's memory.
- **Offering reassurance** – provide consistent love and reassurance to help children feel safe and supported.

Navigating grief is both a personal and family journey.

Together, families can create a sense of connection and healing, helping children make sense of their loss as they grow.



Sepsis – What is it?

Sepsis is the body's overwhelming response to an already present infection. It occurs when the body is fighting an infection but starts to attack itself, leading to tissue damage and organ failure. Sepsis is a life-threatening medical emergency and requires urgent treatment.

How common is sepsis?

Sepsis is rare and not every infection will lead to sepsis.

Sepsis is most commonly caused by a bacterial infection, but it can also be caused by both fungal and viral infections.

Globally, it is estimated that 20 million children develop sepsis each year and 2.9 million children die from sepsis. In Australia, more than 50 children die from sepsis each year.

Anyone can get sepsis, including people who are normally fit and healthy, but very young children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Māori children, and children with underlying health conditions are at a greater risk of sepsis than the general population.

Why diagnosing sepsis is difficult

Sepsis can be difficult to diagnose in children as the signs and symptoms may mimic other common childhood illnesses like the common cold, influenza or gastroenteritis.

There is no one single diagnostic test to confirm sepsis.

To diagnose sepsis, the doctor will assess the patient's medical history, signs and symptoms, including temperature, heart rate, blood pressure and how drowsy or confused they are. Laboratory tests may identify a specific bacteria, virus or fungus that has caused sepsis.

Sepsis Resources



Sepsis – Perth Children’s Hospital

Information for patients and families about paediatric sepsis.
www.pch.health.wa.gov.au/For-patients-and-visitors/Sepsis



Sepsis Australia

Information and support for Australian patient and families about bereavement support and support groups and advice.
www.australiansepsisnetwork.net.au/information-and-support/



KidsHealth NZ

Information about the bereavement reactions of children and young people by age group.
www.kidshealth.org.nz/death-grief/bereavement-reactions-of-children-young-people-by-age-group



The UK Sepsis Trust

A pamphlet developed by the UK Sepsis Trust – Bereavement Following Sepsis.
www.sepsistrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Bereavement-Following-Sepsis.pdf





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