

Big Situations – Stories for Reflection

Loss and Grief



This story refers to a child dying and may raise big feelings. Before you read this, make sure this is the right time for you, and that you can access support for yourself if you need it. Should any of the information in this document cause distress for you, it may be helpful to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636 or the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800.

Read this story to help you be better prepared to respond to loss, or if you have already encountered a situation like this and you want to hear about other educators' experiences. This is a fictional story informed by real experiences. If you are facing a situation like this now, you can find [Tips for responding now](#) and resources to support children, parents and educators in the [Big Situations](#) section of the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency website.

When a child dies

Chloe had attended our service for three years when she died in an accident. Everyone knew her, and her death was completely unexpected. When we heard about the accident from other families everything seemed to happen really fast.

We pulled the staff aside in each room, let them know, and then quickly assessed how they were coping. I let the centre owner know what had happened, and then I rang Chloe's family. I wasn't sure about doing that, but I thought it might be best to send out an email to all families, and I wanted to talk to them before I did that. We sent out an email to the staff who weren't there that day, except for one of the team who we knew was especially close to Chloe. I phoned her instead.

We decided not to tell all the children at once in a group. As the children asked about Chloe, we told them what had happened, and answered questions if they had them. I had been worried that we would have a room full of sobbing children, but while some children told us they were sad, and needed comfort, other children wanted to ask questions, and other children just wanted to play. When I sent an email to families, I included a link to some helpful information and indicated that children would cope best if given factual information. For example, saying that Chloe had died rather than that she had gone to sleep. It was also important for us to be aware that families would also share their own beliefs about death with their children.

Families responded in different ways. Some parents who didn't know Chloe's family wanted to organise things for them, but I knew from Mariah, Chloe's mother, that they already had the support they needed.

Different staff also coped in different ways. One was really overwhelmed and took some time off, while others really wanted to be at work, so they could support the children, even though they were also distressed. I reminded everyone about the EAP (Employee Assistance Program), and I used this program myself. It was helpful to talk to someone who wasn't involved at the service. Organising leave was tricky because the Award only provides bereavement leave if a family member has died. Initially, some of the staff wanted to close the service and thought that everyone should go to the funeral. Different people had varying expectations, often based either on what happened in their culture when someone dies, or on their personal experience of loss.

We talked as a team and decided that a couple of staff would go to the funeral, and that we would keep the service open. The staff who stayed at our service told me afterwards it was a bit strange, knowing that the funeral was happening, but they realised that the children weren't aware of the funeral in the way an adult would be.

We had the book *The Memory Tree* on our bookshelf, which encourages the idea of sharing memories of someone who has died, and some of the children asked us to read this book. The

family asked us if they could donate something to be a memorial for Chloe and we decided to plant a tree, that could be Chloe's memory tree, like in the story.

Looking back, the best thing we did was to talk things through as a team, and then shared our ideas with families, so they were more confident both in us, and in what they could do at home. We also learnt that everyone copes with grief differently. We shared some resources as a team and talking about those helped us feel more confident in our conversations with families and children.

Things to think about:

- ▶ Using your knowledge of child development and inclusion, think about some ways in which children's experiences of loss and grief may be different from those of adults.
- ▶ What strengths do you think you (and your team) would bring in an experience of loss and grief?
- ▶ Think about your work context and the needs of the children you are including. How might your experiences be similar or different to the educators in the story, if a child died?
- ▶ Who could you call on if you need information or someone to talk to if you experienced the death of a child in your work role?

The following resources can help you be better prepared for critical incidents:

- ▶ [National Mental Health Education Initiative](#) (Be You)

Access professional learning modules for educators or to get the most benefit from Be You, sign up your service to create a learning community and access a Be You consultant from Early Childhood Australia.

- ▶ [Community Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) (Emerging Minds)

Access short courses and resources to help educators support children following a disaster or community trauma.

Note: See additional resources on the [Loss and Grief](#) and [Critical Incidents](#) pages of the Big Situations online resource.

Please remember:

An Inclusion Professional can support educators to proactively prepare to have the skills and confidence to respond to big situations that may occur. This preparation could include support to use the [Big Situations](#) resource and may involve strategic inclusion planning. It should be noted that big situations often require support from experts that sit outside the role and expertise of the Inclusion Professional. Inclusion Professionals can help you connect with external organisations and agencies as needed.

Disclaimer:

This is a fictional story informed by real experiences to support you to reflect and plan for the future. If you would like support or have any feedback on this resource please [contact us](#).