

Children and Sadness

Infants

As infants, feelings can be new, scary, and overwhelming. For example, if an infant feels the empty, uncomfortable feeling of hunger he/she may cry out wanting help with this feeling. If the caregiver responds by providing food, the infant feels settled.

What might begin as an incomprehensible and overwhelming feeling begins to make sense as *“this feeling means I’m hungry”* and *“if I cry out food will come”*. The caregiver can be seen to have successfully **contained** the infant’s emotions – and with time teaches the infant that feelings can be recognised, understood, and communicated.

Children

This learning continues as infants become children. A caregiver continues to contain and regulate the child’s feelings, through modelling and teaching that when pleasant and unpleasant feelings occur they are understandable, recognisable, and manageable.

Gemma is a six year old child who has been teary and withdrawn since her grandfather, whom she was very close to, died last month. The doctor notices Gemma is very quiet, and asks her to tell him about her Grandfather. Gemma is able to tell the doctor about different things her and her grandfather would do together. The doctor responds in a way that reassures Gemma her feelings are understandable, “it sounds like he was very special to you, and when we lose someone that is special to us we might feel sad”.

It is important for a child who is feeling sad or distressed to be comforted and to have an opportunity to talk about how they are feeling. Some questions which may be helpful when talking about feelings with children are:

What do you do when you feel.....?

What does it feel like in your body?

Where are the places you might go or who might you talk to when you feel.....?

As healthcare providers we are often encountering children who will be experiencing unpleasant emotions such as sadness, fear, or anxiety. Remembering that we can play a role in helping a child recognise and understand these emotions is not only beneficial for them in that moment, but as they encounter other situations in life.

For further information contact Emma Hanieh, Dept Psychological Medicine.

emma.hanieh@health.sa.gov.au

