

Understanding Puddle Jumping Grief

A guide for parents, carers, and teachers

What is Puddle Jumping?

Grief in children often looks different than in adults. Instead of staying sad all the time, children move in and out of grief, much like jumping into and out of a puddle.

Jumping in the puddle → The child feels sad, cries, asks questions, or wants to talk about the person who died.

Jumping out of the puddle → The child laughs, plays, does homework, or seems “back to normal.”

This back-and-forth is a healthy way for children to cope with overwhelming feelings.

Why Do Children Grieve in Jumps?

- Short attention span for big emotions: Children can only manage grief in small amounts.
- Self-protection: Coming out of the puddle gives them a break from strong feelings.
- Continuing childhood: Play and routine activities are just as important as grief for healthy development.

What It Might Look Like in Everyday Life

- A child cries at breakfast, then asks to play a video game an hour later.
- During class, they suddenly talk about the person who died, then return to their schoolwork.
- They may ask the same questions repeatedly (“When is she coming back?”), needing reassurance and consistency.

This doesn't mean they are fine or that they've forgotten. It means they are grieving in short, manageable bursts.

How Adults Can Support a Puddle-Jumping Child

1. Acknowledge both sides

- Comfort them when they're in the puddle.
- Encourage play and normal activities without guilt.

2. Answer questions honestly

- Use clear, age-appropriate words (avoid phrases like "gone to sleep," which can confuse or frighten children).

3. Create safe spaces

- Let them know they can come to you with their feelings, whenever they jump back in.

4. Provide routine and stability

- Regular schedules (mealtimes, bedtime, school) help children feel safe.

5. Be patient with repetition

- Children may ask the same question many times as they process the reality of death.

6. Model healthy coping

- Show that it's okay to be sad and also okay to laugh again. Children learn from watching adults.

Key Messages for Caregivers

- Grieving children are not "forgetting" when they seem happy.
- They need both space to feel sad and permission to play.
- Their grief will reappear in puddles throughout life stages (birthdays, milestones, anniversaries).
- Your steady presence and reassurance are the most important support.

Final Thought

Puddle Jumping is a reminder that grief is not constant — it comes in and out, sometimes many times a day. By allowing children to jump in and out safely, we help them build resilience, trust, and hope for life after loss.