

Supporting your child with Bereavement



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Image by Niamh
All Hallows Catholic School

Working for a brighter future together



1. Introduction

The aim of this document

Children and young people are likely to experience bereavement at some stage in their life; this document aims to offer ideas to parents and carers on how best to support children and young people who experience loss.

Grieving and isolation

We all grieve differently and everyone's experience of loss is different. Whether it is expected, or comes as a complete shock, bereavement is painful and traumatic. Losing somebody whether they are a colleague, friend or loved one is arguably one of the most difficult things for anyone to go through and cope with.

There is no right or wrong way for somebody to feel when they are grieving for a loved one, but there are seven recognised stages of grief:

1. Shock/denial
2. Pain/guilt
3. Anger/bargaining
4. Depression/reflection/loneliness
5. The upward turn
6. Reconstruction and working through
7. Acceptance and hope

There is no clear divide between one stage and the next, but, with time, these feelings will become less intense.



Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time and talking with those we rely on and trust most is one of the most helpful ways to cope. Isolation can make it harder to process and express feelings of grief.

At times like this when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, people can find themselves distracted from dealing with their grief. They could be worrying about the situation as a whole or worrying about themselves or others.

Common feelings and emotions

Everybody experiences grief in their own way, individuals, both children and adults may feel all or some of the following feelings and emotions:

Shock – You may feel numb and emotionless as you try to grasp what has happened

Sadness – Feelings of overwhelming sadness can be scary, but it's important to allow yourself to cry and let it out. As well as being sad, some people may think about events leading up to a death repeatedly, for example seeing a loved one very poorly.

Anger – This is a perfectly natural emotion to feel after you lose someone. You may feel angry at them, their illness or yourself

Guilt – You may feel regret for things you did or didn't say, or feel somehow to blame for not stopping them from passing away

Disbelief – It may feel as though the person who died is going to walk in the room. When you wake up, you may feel that it can't be true.

Physical symptoms – You may feel jumpy, tense, or restless. Some people shake, sweat or cannot speak normally; or have aches and pains such as headaches or stomach upsets; or feel they are choking. You may struggle to sleep or eat as you normally would.

Distracted/forgetful – As your mind is distracted by grief you may find it very difficult to concentrate or communicate well. You may feel overwhelmed and unable to get on with things without making simple mistakes. Things may feel pointless.

Anxiety – Feeling easily overwhelmed, struggling in social situations, worrying unnecessarily about things, or the welfare and safety of your loved ones and those closest to you

Frightened or panicky – You may worry about more deaths happening. You may find you get stressed about things that normally you could cope with. You may feel angry, for example that plans are ruined. You may have dreams that scare you.

Many people find it helpful to know that other people bereaved in sudden and distressing ways have gone on to lead full and happy lives, while still remembering with sorrow what has happened.



2. Supporting Children affected by death

Dealing with loss can be a distressing and traumatic experience and in the current situation, some of these effects can be heightened. Children may already be experiencing anxiety because of what they are hearing on the news and, as a result, may show stronger reactions to a death and may worry that they or others close to them may die.

How children and young people react to death

Many children and young people can show outward distress when reacting to a death, whilst some will hardly react at all. There may be cases where they do not know how to react, as they do not fully understand what has happened.

The way in which children and young people respond to a death is impacted by the following:

- their age and developmental stage. For children with special educational needs, it will be their functional level of understanding rather than their chronological age, which will be most helpful in thinking about how they may understand the death and how to support them.
- the nature and emotional quality of the relationship they had with the individual who has died and the particular circumstances.
- the behaviour and attitude of those around them when dealing with the death.

Below are some broad generalisations about how children may respond to death at different ages and stages.

- **0-2 years:** Infants are not able to understand about death but will experience the loss as a separation; they may become withdrawn with increased crying. The emotional state of people around them can impact, so normality and routine are very important at this stage.
- **2-5 years:** Death is seen as reversible by children of this age; they may think that something they said or did caused the person to die. They may be greatly affected by the sadness of family members; this can cause nightmares, sleeping and/or eating disturbances and violent play.
- **6-12 years:** They want to see death as reversible but are beginning to understand it as final. They may not understand their own involuntary emotional response to the loss, which might include disturbing feelings of fear and guilt. Behaviour may include immature reactions or outwardly difficult behaviour. Physical manifestations of emotional pain may also develop e.g. headaches or stomach aches.
- **13-18 years:** Children at this age usually have an adult concept of death but their response and emotions may be heightened and very powerful. Reactions may include anger, depression and noncompliance. The loss may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings.

What can help?

While every child and young person will respond slightly differently, there are things which you can do to help them to understand what has happened, process their own feelings and emotions and, in time, move through the grieving process.

- Be honest and open; explain why the person died at an age-appropriate level. Be guided by their questions. Children tend to pick up when questions are avoided and then start to imagine all sorts of things, which could add to their anxiety.
- Answer questions as truthfully as you can in a way the child can understand. It is okay not to have all the answers and to say that you do not know. They need to trust that you are being honest with them so that they feel they can ask you further questions.
- Use clear language such as "dead" and "death" rather than what we may perceive as more comforting language such as "gone to sleep" or "loss". These phrases can be confusing for children and may cause them to believe that if someone is lost then they can be found, for example.
- Do not force your child to talk about what has happened but create an atmosphere where they know they can talk about their experience of the death and that you will listen to what they have to say. Reassure them if they blame themselves in any way, which can be common.
- Talk about the person who has died and share happy memories of them.
- Do not be afraid to express your own emotions and explain to your child that this is a normal part of the process when someone dies. However, do not expect them to look after you as much as you look after them.
- Reassure your child that it is okay for them to be upset too and help them to find ways of expressing difficult feelings, which are not disruptive or destructive. Help them to understand that their behaviours may be as a result of feeling angry because they miss the person who has died and don't understand why it happened. Talking this through will help them to better understand their own emotions.
- Try to maintain their feelings of security, of being cared for, and of being loved
- Try to maintain all the necessary practical care for the child, e.g. ensuring that they are eating, caring for themselves, sleeping etc
- Keep up the routines of home/and school encouraging children to engage with their usual activities and interests so that there is a sense of familiarity- "life goes on", but be prepared to accommodate some outbursts or extreme reactions by providing "time-out".
- Continue to listen, even if the same questions reappear, to talk and communicate.

- Do not pretend to believe what you don't believe, about what has happened
- Try to understand the child's feelings, as a child of their particular age, and reassure where possible that their reactions are perfectly normal
- Do not expect your child to grieve in exactly the same way that you do or that a sibling does.
- Reassure your child that it is okay to laugh and have fun.
- As the death of a loved one can hugely impact a family routine and structure, you should prepare your child in advance for changes they may face.
- Help your child to say goodbye; include them in discussions about the funeral and allow them to make some choices in how they would like to take part. At the moment, when funerals are likely to be much more restricted, find alternative ways to help them say goodbye such as gathering photos, making a memory box, letting off balloons or planting some seeds.
- Allow yourself time to grieve so that you are best able to support your child.
- On the child's return to school, share information with their teacher so that they are aware of what they have experienced and how they have dealt with it. Returning to a different situation may trigger some feelings and emotions, which you felt they had dealt with.

3. Sources of Support







Supporting a child can be upsetting and emotionally very demanding, it is therefore very important to get support for yourself. Find another adult with whom you can talk to on a regular basis - a person who can listen, understand and comment.






Don't be afraid to admit to colleagues, family and managers that you are struggling at any particular time.

There is a wealth of resources and expertise that can be accessed by parents or carers.



Bereavement Support Services for individuals children and families

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| CHILDLINE  | www.childline.org.uk Tel: on 0800 11 11 at any time | Childline is the free 24-hour helpline for children and young people in the UK. Children and young people can call about any problem, at any time. The website has advice and sources of further support |
| CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT NETWORK  | www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk Tel: 020 7843 6309 Email: cbn@ncb.org.uk | A national, multi-professional federation of organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people. |
| CHILD BEREAVEMENT SERVICE  | www.mariecurie.org.uk Tel: 0800 090 2309 8 am – p.m. Monday to Friday 11 am – p.m. Saturday | For people who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness, or are supporting someone who has. They have a Freephone Support Line, web chat free publications and resources. |
| CHILD BEREAVEMENT UK  | www.childbereavementuk.org Tel: 0800 02 888 40 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm Email: support@childbereavementuk.org | A support and information service. They have an app for 11-25-year-olds who have been bereaved and their friends, teachers, and parents, who want to know how to support them. It covers: grief, bereavement, feelings and how others can help |
| CHILD DEATH HELPLINE  | childdeathhelpline.org.uk/ Volunteer Child Death Helpline Freephone from landlines: 0800 282 986 Freephone from mobiles: 0808 800 6019 | The Volunteer Child Death Helpline runs in conjunction with The Alder Centre Alder Hey and Great Ormond Street Hospital for all those affected by the death of a child of any age. The helpline is open every day throughout the year |
| COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS  | www.tcf.org.uk Tel: 0845 123 2304 daily 10 am -4 pm and 7-10 pm | Support for bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents who have suffered the death of a child of any age and from any cause. There is a helpline and practical advice. |

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|  <p>CRUSE Cruse Bereavement Care</p> | <p>www.cruse.org.uk Tel: Helpline 0808 808 1677 Daily 9.30am-5pm Tues, Wed, Thurs 8pm</p> | <p>Support, advice and information for children, young people and adults when someone dies. Hope Again: a website for young people which has videos and personal stories as well as offering direct support.</p> |
| <p>ELSIE EVER AFTER</p>  | <p>www.elsieeverafter.org.uk/ Tel: 07394 070 403 Email: elsieeverafter@hotmail.com Facebook: facebook.com/ElsieEverAfter</p> | <p>Support for bereaved families in and around Cheshire. They have packs for children (primary and secondary age) that contain a bereavement workbook and a story book about grief. They also offer schools and professionals advice and materials on how to support bereaved young people.</p> |
| <p>NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY</p>  | <p>www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx 0808 800 4104</p> | <p>They have general information about autism. There is also a section specifically on illness and bereavement, how to explain this to someone with autism and how to support them</p> |
| <p>PAPYRUS</p>  | <p>www.papyrus-uk.org Tel: Hopeline UK 0800 00684141 Mon-Fri 10.00-5.00 7.00-10.00 Weekends 2.00-5.00</p> | <p>Prevention of young suicide. Resources and support for both those dealing with suicide, depression or emotional distress and those supporting them.</p> |
| <p>SAMARITANS</p>  | <p>www.samaritans.org Tel: 116 123 24 hours mailto:jo@samaritans.org Step by Step team: Tel: 0808 168 2528</p> | <p>Listening Support for people who don't feel ok/have something troubling them; and for people who are concerned about the wellbeing of someone else. Facing the Future: Support groups for people over 18 bereaved by suicide Step by Step service: support education settings so that they can respond effectively following the suspected or attempted suicide of someone from within their community; taking practical steps to reduce the risk of further deaths.</p> |

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| <p>TOGETHER FOR SHORT LIVES</p>  | <p>www.togetherforshortlives.org.uk Helpline 0808 8088 100 Telephone 0117 989 7820 Daily 10am-4pm</p> | <p>They offer confidential emotional support and information on a range of issues and provide easily digestible information about available support for families facing the death of a child. They connect families with support services.</p> |
| <p>VISION</p>  | <p>www.visyon.org.uk Tel: 0800 652 6293 Email: enquiries@visyon.org.uk</p> | <p>Support Services for children and their families including: One-to-one therapy, Therapeutic group work, Family support work, Therapeutic play, Mentoring, Cognitive behavioural therapy, Solution-focused brief therapy, Parent support groups They also support school based work.</p> |
| <p>WINSTONS WISH</p>  | <p>www.winstonswish.org/ Tel: 08088 020 021 Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm email ask@winstonswish.org</p> | <p>Support for children following the death of a parent or sibling. They have school specific resources and offer support, not only to bereaved children but also to practitioners so they can best support the child.</p> |
| <p>YOUNG MINDS</p>  | <p>youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-grief-and-loss/ Tel: Parents Helpline 0808 802 5544</p> | <p>The organisation support the mental wellbeing of young people and to those who are supporting them including parents and schools. They have a specific section on their website focusing on bereavement.</p> |