



Bereavement

Support for Parents/Carers

Caerphilly Educational Psychology Service

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1. Introduction

Grieving and isolation

Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time and talking with those we rely on and trust is one of the most helpful ways to cope. The impact of dealing with a bereavement, compounded with feelings of worry about external situations, can mean that feelings of grief aren't fully expressed. Feelings of isolation can further impact on grief and how a child manages their feelings at this time.

This document aims to highlight some of the ways we can support those who are bereaved.





2. Supporting Children and Young People Affected by Death

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 related to 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 response will also be affected by the nature and emotional quality of the relationship that they had with the individual who has died and the particular circumstances of the loss. It is also influenced by the behaviour and attitude of those around them when dealing with the death.

Below are some broad guidelines and generalisations about how children may respond to death at different ages and stages. However, it is important to remember that all children will develop at their own pace and in different ways.

Typical Grief Reactions by Age:

0-1 year:

- They have no ability to conceptualise death.
- Their memory capacity for specific relationships is undeveloped. Unless the person who died was a close caregiver, they may have very little response.

- They may be aware that something is different or missing.

1-2 years:

- Children younger than 2 years old do not understand the concept of death.
- They are concrete thinkers. It may feel callous to explain death in a straightforward way, but metaphors and euphemisms will be confusing. Provide simple and clear explanations.
- When someone dies, they are likely to show behaviours associated with separation anxiety, e.g. looking for the person and crying. If they are old enough to ask, they may inquire where the person is or when they will be back.
- They probably won't understand that there are factors beyond our control and won't understand why the person chose to leave, particularly if the person who died was an adult. Make sure to explain that death and leaving were not things their loved one chose.
- They are not too young to sense the stress and emotion felt by grownups in their lives.
- Sticking to their normal routine may provide a sense of security, normalcy, and comfort.
- Give them attention and provide them with reassurance.

Signs of distress may include increased irritability and crying, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, and/or withdrawing. If these or any other behaviours concern you, you may want to discuss them with their GP or seek outside counselling.

2-4 years:

- They still don't understand the finality of death and still might see it as abandonment.
- They see death as reversible or not permanent. Dead people are simply sick or asleep and can get better or wake up.
- They may ask the same questions over and over; be patient and stick with the same straightforward explanation.
- They may not have the words to explain how they are feeling. You are likely to see expressions of grief through behaviour and through play with toys and/or drawing.
- They may experience separation anxiety. When you must leave the child, it might be helpful to prepare them in advance that you will be leaving and provide them with reassurance about when you will return.
- They may feel the person's absence in an intense way one moment and be back to happily playing the next.
- They will be aware of changes in patterns and routine. Provide them with a lot of reassurance, nurturing, and consistency.

Signs of distress may include regressive behaviours in the areas of sleep, potty training, and/or eating. They may become clingy. They may appear irritable, confused or suffer from nightmares. If these or any other behaviours concern you, you may want to discuss them with their GP or seek outside counselling.

4-9 years:

- They are starting to develop the ability to feel guilt. Guilt can be confusing for them and they may feel guilty for odd things.
- "Magical Thinking" is seen around 4 years old. This is when children believe their thoughts and wishes can cause things to happen. For this reason children may irrationally feel responsible for the death because of thoughts or wishes they had prior to the death. (Example: I'm responsible for the death

because I told my mum I hated her and wished she would go away).

- They may be interested in the process of dying and ask 'how' or 'why' things have happened. Their questioning may be repetitive.
- They have begun to understand that death is not reversible or temporary, but still may believe that death only happens to some people and will not happen to them.
- Death is often personified as things like ghosts and monsters.
- They lack the words to express their emotions. They may have strong feelings of grief and loss but can't express this in appropriate ways. They may express feelings through anger and frustration.
- Symbolic play using drawings and stories can be helpful.
- They may need permission and encouragement to grieve. Encourage expression of feelings through talk, play, or physical outlets.

Signs of significant distress may include regression, nightmares, sleep disturbances, and/or changes in eating. They may engage in violent play. If these or any other behaviours concern you, you may want to discuss them with their GP or seek outside counselling.

9-12 years:

- They understand the finality of death and that everyone eventually dies, however they still may engage in denial that it will happen to them (don't we all?)
- They are curious about the physical aspects of death – what does the body look like? What does it feel like? etc. Provide straightforward explanations.
- They know how to express their feelings and emotions, but they may choose not to. Encourage them to express the range of feelings they are having.
- They may be concerned with how others are reacting to the death. What is the

right way to react? How should they react?

- Involve them. Allow them to give input and make choices regarding funerals, memorials, belongings, etc.

Signs of distress may include having problems at school, withdrawing from friends, acting out, disturbances in sleeping and eating, an overwhelming concern with the body, and/or role confusion. If these or any other behaviours concern you, you may want to discuss them with their GP or seek outside counselling.

12-18 years:

- They are capable of having a more adult perspective of death.
- Involve them. Allow them to give input and make choices regarding funerals, memorials, belongings, etc.
- They are able to think abstractly about death and related concepts.
- They may try to make sense of things, philosophise, and/or search for meaning.
- Their mourning may be more traditional – extreme sadness, anger, denial. Even though they are capable of expressing grief they may choose not to.
- They may try to give the appearance that they are coping well when they are not.
- They may feel forced to act as a consoler and comforter for younger children or adults.
- Be available, listen, and encourage them to talk about it. Do not attempt to minimise what they are feeling.
- Set a good example by speaking about your own feelings surrounding the death (without putting them in the role of the comforter).
- They may be more willing to talk about grief with people outside of the family. Grief support groups may be helpful.
- They may act out or engage in dangerous behaviour such as risk taking, drugs, alcohol, etc.

Signs of significant distress may include depression, anger, suicidal thoughts,

rule breaking, role confusion, and/or acting out. If these or any other behaviours concern you, you may want to discuss them with the school counsellor or GP or seek outside counselling.





3. 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. Answer questions as truthfully as you can in a way the child can understand. It's okay not to have all the answers and to say that you don't know.
- 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.
- Don't 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. It might be helpful to create opportunities where there is time and space to talk such as doing a quiet activity together such as going for a walk, but do not force them to speak. 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.
- Don't 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, remember that they are still developing the ability to understand their grief and to support others, so may not be able to support an adult in the same way.
- 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. Try to stay calm and avoid confrontation. They need to work through their emotions, so help them to express and cope with their feelings by being patient. If they get angry with you and cry, although difficult, try to see this as them sharing their feelings and emotions with you. This is part of the grieving process. 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.
- Continue with established routines as much as possible, encouraging children to engage with their usual activities and interests so that there is a sense of familiarity. There may be situations where it is more difficult for your child to have a physical or mental break from the loss or trauma they have experienced so it is important to try to provide opportunities which allow for this. Watch a film together, encourage them to do things they enjoy such as going for a bike ride, walking the dog, playing a game etc.
- Try to encourage a 'no pressure' outline of the day, which involves getting up in the morning, eating and drinking regularly and going to bed before midnight. It is recognised that sleep may initially be a particular issue for young people who have experienced trauma. They should not worry about this, unless it continues for more than two weeks, in which case, you may wish to contact your GP for advice.
- Try to plan get togethers or opportunities to speak to friends.

- Make sure they realise that it is ok to be angry, shout, cry, and to question but also to smile, laugh and engage in activities that make them happy. It is important to do things that make us smile when we are sad, this is how we look after ourselves and we should not feel guilty or bad for doing this.
- Don't expect your child to grieve in exactly the same way that you do or that a sibling does.
- 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. If attending or planning for the funeral won't be an option then find alternative or additional ways to help them say goodbye such as gathering photos, making a memory box, 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 thought they had dealt with.





4. Sources of Support

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure accuracy at the time of the creation of this document (16th April 2020), changes may be made by the individual organisations in the future.

There is a wealth of resources and expertise that can be accessed by schools or settings and parents or carers. Some examples are listed here:

- **Bereavement: Advice and information for parents (Young Minds)**
- **Resources for children and young people (Child Bereavement UK)**

National Support

Childline:

Telephone: 0800 1111

Website: childline.org.uk

A free and confidential, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in distress or danger. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn.

Cruse Bereavement Care:

Telephone: 0808 808 1677 (Mon to Friday 9.30am - 5pm and 8pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday)

Website: cruse.org.uk

A charity supporting bereaved people of all ages. The free phone helpline is available to support anyone who has been bereaved and wants to speak with someone directly. Their website provides information specific to supporting young people with bereavement. They provide a wealth of resources regarding how adults can support young people through bereavement generally.

Hope Again:

Telephone: 0808 808 1677 (Mon to Friday 9.30am – 5pm)

Website: hopeagain.org.uk

This youth bereavement service, run by Cruse, is free and confidential. The helpline is available specifically for children and young people who have been affected by death. The website provides online information for young people through advice and sharing of personal and family stories from others who have experienced bereavement.

Winston's Wish:

Telephone: 08088 020 02 (Mon to Friday 9am – 5pm)

Website: winstonswish.org

They are a leading childhood bereavement charity and the largest provider of services to bereaved children, young people and their families in the UK. The helpline offers therapeutic advice for parents, carers and professionals regarding supporting a grieving child or young person.

For young people themselves they offer an email service, called 'ASK', for advice and support following a bereavement. They also offer an online chat (currently available Wednesday and Friday 12 – 4pm) for young people and a 'Crisis Messenger' service accessed by texting 'WW' to 85258,

Kooth:

Website: kooth.com

Free and anonymous online counselling support for young people aged between 10 and 25. Available Monday to Friday 9am - 10pm and Saturday to Sunday 6pm-10pm.

Young Minds:

Website: youngminds.org.uk

A charity supporting children and young people's mental health, they also offer advice and information for parents regarding bereavement and on talking to young people about it.

Grief Encounter:

Telephone: 0808 802 0111 (Mon to Friday 9am - 9pm)

Website: griefencounter.org.uk

Support for children and families who have been bereaved, available via phone, online chat and email. This is particularly accessible for older children and offers interviews with young people who have experienced bereavement and provides a 'Bereavement Support Teen Guide'. They offer a helpline, live webchat and email service which can be directly accessed by young people.

BBC Bitesize:

Website: bbc.co.uk/bitesize

In liaison with Child Bereavement UK they offer a range of questions and answers and short videos regarding bereavement, illness and loss.

Child Bereavement UK:

Telephone: 0800 02 88840

Website: childbereavementuk.org

An organisation that helps children and young people (up to age 25), parents, and families, to rebuild their lives when a child grieves or when a child dies. The website provides information and resources outlining how to support children and young people in talking death. They also provide a Live Chat and email service.

There is a 'Child Bereavement UK' app designed for 11-25 year olds who have experienced bereavement. There is also an online game 'Apart of Me' for ages 12+ which is designed to help individuals cope with the death of a loved one - available on the App store and Google Play. The website also offers a Live Chat and email service.



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