



# Understanding Bereavement for Children



(Advice from Queenscourt hospice, Winston's Wish and Sefton Educational Psychology Service)

## Consider your own wellbeing

Given the nature of this advice, it may be upsetting for some people to access. Please consider your own wellbeing and access this at your own pace.

If you need any support relating to the topic, please reach out to a family member, friend or trusted colleague.

If you would like further support, the following contacts may be useful:

Education Support, 08000 562 561

The National Cruse helpline on 0808 808 1677

Qwell - an online emotional wellbeing support service.

Select 'Sefton' from the dropdown menu when signing up. <https://www.qwell.io/>

## The aims of this advice:

Understanding death at different ages and stages

The grieving process at different ages and stages

Ways to talk to children about death

How to support children who have been bereaved

Helping children to remember people who have died

Balancing truth and reassurance

## Understanding death - a developmental perspective

Here 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.

**Children aged 0-2 years:** Experience the loss as a separation, they may become withdrawn with increased crying. Children of this age will be influenced primarily by a parents' / carers emotional states and may be unsettled for a few weeks. Normality and routine are very important at this stage.

**Children aged 2-5 years:** Death is seen as reversible by children of this age and they find it difficult to comprehend the finality of loss. Experts believe children at this age believe death is temporary as if the person who has died has gone away and they are waiting for them to come back. Young children tend to see themselves as the centre of the universe and so believe their own wishes, thoughts and actions cause what happens to themselves and others. Children this age may experience a compelling urge to recover the lost one (which fits in with their experience of fairy stories).

At this age it is important to use precise terms when talking about death not 'you've lost a love one' - a child interprets this literally and assumes the person can be found.

Sometimes they blame themselves or believe if they are 'good' enough perhaps the person will come back. They may become fearful that they themselves will die. They may react quite casually to the loss at first but then become upset or ask about loss/death at a later time. Often they will experience nightmares, eating disturbances, confusion, revert to earlier stages of development or even seem unaffected.

At this stage, children are greatly affected by the sadness of family members.

Attending funerals help children even the very young accept their loss, children may even re-enact some aspect of it. This can be distressing for the adults but serves an important function for the child. Play is a means of understanding and integrating life's experiences.

Spending time with family members and sharing memories is really important this strong social support and providing opportunities to talk can help with the pain

Children benefit from the distraction and normality of routine and school and are supported by their friends and family. Grief may also resurface at different developmental milestones

**Children aged 6-12 years:** Children at this age want to see death as reversible but are beginning to understand it as final. They may not understand their own involuntary emotional response to loss, which might include feelings of fear and guilt. Behaviour may include immature reactions or outwardly challenging behaviour. Physical manifestations of emotional pain may also develop, eg. headaches or stomach aches. Children may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers. The death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else.

**Adolescence 13-18 years:** Young people 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 non-compliance. The loss may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may hide their feelings.

### **Understanding Grief**

Although there are common features in the grieving process, every child will respond to loss in their own unique way. It is important just to be attentive to the child's individual needs, thoughts and preferences.

**Shock** - This is the first response to death. In adults this brings a barrage of sensations - resulting in either physical collapse or numb apathy. A child's reaction may be a silent withdrawal or a wild outburst of screaming. A very young child may feel a bewildering sense of confusion rather than shock. They can't quite understand what is going on. Let the child collapse, cry, sit or lie down. Hug them. They need time to be sad and to talk about the death. Adults in shock are usually able to cope, albeit in a state of unreality, with practical affairs such as arranging the funeral. For children who do not have anything specific to attend to, it can become a lonely time.

**Denial** - This is often experienced by adults and children in the early days of their bereavement. They know their loved one is dead, but their every thought is so centred on that person that they cannot believe he or she is not around.

### **Growing awareness:**

**Searching:** For children this is perhaps the most logical part of their grieving. They have lost something, now they have to find it. The fact that they never do find it builds up inside them as a huge fear. After such an enormous loss, the child will be terrified of losing other people and things.

**Despair:** Once it is realised that no amount of searching or longing is going to find that lost person, then despair may follow. For a child, the crying may start again, the screaming and the rejection of love from any other person.

**Anger:** Even a tiny child can feel anger towards a parent/carer who has left them, or anger at God who has taken them away. Real fury may show itself, not in words, but in physical toughness - perhaps breaking toys or lying kicking on the floor. In adolescence, the same anger may be expressed in more outspoken or aggressive ways, such as hitting out at others verbally or physically, or stealing. Whether a child or adolescent is able to express anger will depend greatly on whether they feel that their feelings will be accepted by the adults around them.

**Depression (anxiety and guilt):** The phases of anxiety and guilt become entwined, especially in children. Children's minds are often filled with practical anxieties such as "Will we be able to go on holiday?", "Who'll give me my pocket money and help me with my homework?" An older adolescent may be worried that s/he will be unable to go to college or will have to stay at home to look after younger siblings. During this stage it is usual to experience feelings of despair, emptiness and the pain of the loss.

**Acceptance: readjustment:** The loss is no longer felt as sharply. The adult/child is more able to talk about the loss, can settle into new circumstances and regains a greater interest in life.

### **Complicating Factors in Bereavement at this time**

**Unpredictability** - it is not just very old, very frail people who die. The person they know may have been perfectly well last time they saw them.

**Suddenness:** Children have little time to adjust to the changing future

**Separation:** Children are physically distant from those who might support them - wider family, friends, teachers

**Support structures:** The current disruption of normal routine may mean children have fewer places in which to switch off and focus on something else, for example, school, sports club etc

**Anxiety:** While children and young people will worry about other family members dying after any death, in the present situation, such anxiety is sharper and less easy to soothe

**Lack of 'specialness':** The death of a child's important person won't receive as much attention as before the crisis

**Absence of rituals:** with heavy restrictions on funerals, children will have less chance to 'say goodbye' in a formal sense

Some of these factors can make it more complicated to talk about. It may also feel harder to assure children that other people they know won't die yet.

### **Talking to children about the death of someone close**

It is likely that children will come to you specifically for comfort or enlightenment and it will help to have given some thought as to how you will respond.

When talking to a child about the death of someone close, the language used, and the child's need for information and understanding, will vary according to their age and developmental stage, and the specific cause of death. However, the child's basic needs will always remain the same:

- Use simple, direct language appropriate to their level of understanding
- Use the terms 'died', 'dead', 'death'- avoid euphemisms such as 'lost'
- Keep children informed about what has happened / what will happen
- Answer questions openly. It's OK to say if you don't know. If you feel an answer is too difficult for them to hear, explain that honestly
- Repeat explanations more than once
- Reassure them that they are not to blame
- Allow and encourage the safe sharing of feelings and thoughts
- Listen to their feelings, worries and memories

### **Supporting children through their bereavement**

**Keep in touch** - maintaining some contact with class teachers and support staff can be hugely helpful to children who have experienced the death of a loved one e.g. Use the class email at regular times throughout the week.

**Keep a routine:** Try and bring an element of 'normality' to their days and provide some structure to their days

**Listen and reassure:** Acknowledge how strange and difficult this situation is, rather than trying to make it better. Listen to their worries and fears: these are real and we can't take them away, but it will help children if someone they know and trust hears them. Reassure them when you are able to do so honestly.

### **Further support**

Child Bereavement Network: <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/>

Child Bereavement Trust: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Winston's Wish: <https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Helpline number for Winston's Wish - 08088 020 021

Simon Says: <https://www.simonsays.org.uk/>

Hope again: <https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>

Compassionate Friends: [www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)

### **Helping a child remember someone who has died**

There are many things you can do to help a child remember someone who has died:

You could create a book of memories filled with photos, stories, cards and letters; you could suggest they make a memory box and talk with them about what they might include; you could hold a small candlelight ceremony with them; help them create a calendar of important dates and ways in which they could mark them; plant some bulbs in a pot which will become flowers dedicated to the memory of the person who has died. You could also talk about a First Aid Kit, a collection of things that make them feel better on bad days.

## **Remember**

- Reassure the child that it is OK to play and have fun sometimes, as well as feeling sad
- Listen to the child when they want to talk, even if they ask the same questions over and over again.
- Share a book - this is always a good way to start / prompt a conversation with young children

## **Books to share:**

The Invisible string by Patrice Karst

The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr

I'll always love you by Hans Wilhelm

I miss you by Pat Thomas

Badger's Parting Gift by Susan Varley

When you lose a friend by Helena Fletcher-Hill (You will find this story on our website)

<https://primarysite-prod-sorted.s3.amazonaws.com/farnborough-road-infant-school/UploadedDocument/6d4fdd4d7e5647239f3f1e33bad1e264/when-you-lose-a-friend-final.pdf>