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Children's Services

Dealing with the loss of a loved one or friend



Winston's Wish
the charity for bereaved children

©: This information has been adapted from wording from the Winston's Wish website.

Please keep an eye on the Winston's Wish website and follow their digital channels for any changes to support information that are publicised. Please also sign up to the Winston's Wish monthly newsletter here:

www.winstonswish.org

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Understanding how children and young people grieve?

As a bereaved parent or carer you will be experiencing your own grief and the idea of having to support your children at the same time will seem daunting.

The information in this booklet is designed to help you respond to the needs of your child or children when a loved one or friend has died.

How do children and young people grieve?

Children experience grief and loss differently from adults. Their reaction will depend on their age and experiences.

Children's and young people's reactions can vary from distress to indifference. They may be very tearful or may ask to play with their toys.

None of these reactions is uncommon or abnormal. The younger child may seem to be unaffected, but will ask questions 'out of the blue'.

Grief and loss happens in many ways during children's lives. The death of a loved one or friend is the most extreme experience of grief and loss that children and young people can encounter. Each member of a family will express their grief differently, but this is normal.

Children's understanding about death and dying increases with age

Under 5 or 6 years old

Children may not understand that death is permanent. They may be able to tell others that someone has died and may give an explanation of how that person died. However, they will expect that person to return within a few days.

Children between 5 and 8 years old

Children will start to understand the meaning of 'forever' but may express hope and belief that the death is not permanent. They will try 'bargaining' in the hope that they can reverse what has happened ('If I'm good they will return').

Like older children and young people they may also feel responsible for the death, that in some way they caused it to happen. It is important to tell them that they didn't make their loved one die by what they said, thought or did.

Initially, younger children may ask about the 'where and when'. Slightly older children will also want to know 'how?'

Children may become clingy or reluctant to see parents or carers leave as they begin to understand more about the death of a loved one or friend. They may also become anxious about the health and safety of surviving members of the family.

Older children and young people

From around the age of 10, children will usually have an understanding that death is permanent, that they can cause their own death from a physical action and that illness can cause someone to die. It is important to be truthful as they will understand detailed information. They will want to know 'when', 'where', 'how', and they will be interested in exploring 'why'. Older children may feel very responsible for the health and safety of family members.

What support do bereaved children and young people need?

Here are some simple and practical ways to support bereaved children and young people:

- Being kind to yourself. You can only do your best, when you can. You are still a 'good parent'. Trust your instincts.
- Not feeling you have to 'make it better'; you cannot, but by acknowledging that it has happened and that you care that they are hurting will help them enormously. Give yourself and your children time.
- Not imposing your emotions or beliefs on children and young people. Their feelings and ways of dealing with the situation may be very different from what you think they should be, but there is no right or wrong way, everyone is different.
- Asking them how they are feeling. Talking to your children using short simple words or phrases and checking they have understood is better than giving lots of complicated reasons. Use the words 'died' and 'dead'.
- Checking what they are really asking before you try to answer. Answer questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, say so, but try to find out for them and share that with them.
- Giving small amounts of information over time.
- Show your feelings so that your child feels more relaxed at showing theirs.
- Meeting other children who have been bereaved can be beneficial.
- Involving the children in planning the funeral and other events in connection with the person who has died.
- Remembering that experiencing bereavement is a normal part of life. The pain it brings cannot be made better or taken away.

As children and young people mature cognitively and emotionally they often re-experience the bereavement in light of their changed understanding. This can be misinterpreted as 'they haven't moved on' or 'they're not coping'; when in fact it is very normal to do this throughout life.

How to talk to children and young people about death?

Talking about death with children and young people when someone close to them has died can be the hardest thing you will ever do.

One of the most important things you can do to help bereaved children and young people is to talk about the person who has died. Children and young people do not want to forget and will want to share feelings and memories.

Children and young people will ask difficult questions. Ask them what they think. You can help them understand by building on what they already know and think.

The language used is best kept simple and direct. Using words such as 'died' and 'dead' helps children to understand that there are unique words for this event. They begin to understand that dying is so important that there are new words to describe it, not words used in everyday conversations. For example, the term 'lost' implies that someone can be found. Similarly, the term 'gone to sleep' implies that they will wake up. From a young child's perspective they may begin to believe that no one will look for them if they get lost or that they won't wake up when they go to sleep.

The words used to describe the funeral may be easier to explain using story books where pets have died.

Explaining cremation is a little more complex because children have been warned about the dangers of fire.

Families may have religious or cultural beliefs about life after death. Some may believe in heaven or that the person has become a star or an angel. Others believe that death is a final event.

It is up to you what you tell your children about what happens after someone has died. They may not understand why they cannot visit a person in heaven or may think they can be seen when being naughty or when they want privacy.

Continuing with life

There are many different attitudes towards grief. Even in the same family beliefs may be different. Family members and friends may tell you that 'time heals' or that the 'first year is the worst'. While this is true for some families, others find that the second, third or fourth year can be even harder. Children and young people may need 'permission' to talk about someone who has died. They may be afraid of upsetting you and their silence can be seen as 'coping or forgetting about the dead person'. Be open and show your feelings.

Emotions, feelings, thoughts and behaviour

A huge range of emotions, feelings, thoughts and behaviours can be experienced and displayed by children and young people after the death of someone close. Some reactions may seem inappropriate, but every reaction is natural. Every child and young person responds in their own way. There are no rules to follow when grief occurs. These are common responses that everyone may experience:

- sadness, not necessarily shown in crying. (Don't they realise people cry on the inside too?)
- guilt (if only I hadn't refused to tidy my room)
- anger towards others and/or the person who has died (I hate him for riding so fast on his motorbike; he can't have loved us)
- disbelief (if I don't think about it, she'll come back)
- confusion (I don't understand anything anymore; it's all jumbled up)
- fear (no one's safe; they say everyone dies)
- rage, often expressed in physical violence to objects
- anxiety and a desire to control events and people (what's going to happen next?)
- despair (there's no point in anything anymore)
- feeling numb (I can't feel anything at all)
- wanting to keep busy at all costs (I can't talk I'm off to football)
- yearning (if I could just see her for a second)
- powerlessness (what can I do?)
- worthlessness (it should have been me who died)

Different causes of death

Death, whatever the cause, is overwhelming. If a death is expected, the family may have had time to prepare for the loss, built up memories with photographs, special events and even written a goodbye letter. However, an illness may have been prolonged and the family will not have been able to undertake normal activities. There may have been a period when the family focused on the person who was dying in a way that the children found very hard. If a death is sudden there is no chance for goodbyes and no chance for preparations or adjustment. The last conversations linger in the memory. There may be relief that the person who was dying is no longer suffering.

After the death has occurred

Families will have different cultural and religious beliefs about seeing the person who has died and attending the funeral. However doing these things can help a child begin to:

- say goodbye
- accept the reality and finality of the death
- understand what has happened
- be less scared

Seeing the body

Families and individuals within families can have very different views on whether children and young people should see the body after death. Most bereaved children and young people will value the chance to choose, but they need information about what to expect in order to make an informed choice.

Here are some things that may help children and young people decide whether they want to see the person after they have died:

- Let them know that they can change their minds – at any time.
- Check that they are happy with their choice.
- Explain what will happen, where they will see the body, who they will meet there, what they may hear, for example, music playing.
- Let them know, quite clearly and in detail, what to expect. Explain how the person who has died will be lying in a box called a coffin. Describe what clothes they are wearing. Explain that their eyes will be closed and they may look a little older. Discuss whether they would like to touch the face or hand of the person who has died and explain that their skin will feel cold. Reassure them that it is ok to touch and kiss their forehead if they want to.
- Give them choices about what they do when they enter the room. They can wait by the door, stroke the head or hand, and leave when they want to.
- Children and young people often appreciate taking something with a special meaning to leave with the person who has died, for example, a card they have made, a shell from a favourite holiday or a picture.

Attending funerals

Similarly, there will be different views on whether children and young people should attend the funeral; it will not always be possible or appropriate. Children and young people can be involved in ways which may seem more appropriate and provide a more positive experience. Sometimes a child or young person will regret not attending a funeral. An alternative ceremony that includes them in saying 'goodbye' can be beneficial for the whole family.

Here are some things that may help children and young people decide if they want to attend the funeral:

- Tell them about what is involved.
- Let them know that they can change their minds – at any time.

- Check that they are happy with their choice.
- Have someone with whom the child feels secure to act as their “supporter”. This may be an aunt or uncle or one of your best friends. This allows you to be fully present at the funeral for your own sake.
- Reassure children and young people that the person who has died can no longer feel anything.
- Explain what to expect from people at the funeral. Tell them that some adults may be tearful or may talk and smile at each other. Reassure children and young people that it is ok for them to cry or not to cry. There is no right or wrong way to feel.
- Explain what may happen after the funeral. It may seem like people are having a party after someone has died. Explain that this doesn’t mean that people are happy that the person has died, but it can be a way of celebrating the life that the person has led and sharing happy memories.
- Children and young people like to be involved, and creating opportunities for this to happen will help. This could be in the planning of the funeral service; for example, choosing the music or songs, or taking part in the service through saying or reading or writing something about the person who has died. They may wish for something special to be put in the coffin.
- Give plenty of reassurance that they can still be involved and participate in saying goodbye even if they choose not to attend and that they won’t be criticised if they don’t go to the funeral.

Other ways to say goodbye

Some children and young people who did not attend the funeral may want to say goodbye in other ways. Similar to adults, they may want to do this on a regular basis; for instance, on the anniversary of the person’s death, or the person’s birthday, or other important dates.

Here are some ideas about how children and young people can say goodbye to their loved one:

- Visit the grave or other special place, for example, where the ashes were scattered.
- Visit a place with special memories or a place that they went to regularly.
- Create a special place of their choosing.
- Arrange a ceremony with specially-chosen music, poems and tributes.
- Prepare something to leave in the ‘special place’ - flowers, poem or a toy.
- Light a candle and share special memories with each other.
- Start a collection of memories from family and friends.

Other ways of helping children

There are many activities that can be used to support a bereaved child or young person and their family. Helping to continue the link with the person who has died is an important step along their bereavement journey.

Making a memory box or memory book

Children and young people can decorate a box to collect and store special items that remind them of the person who has died and times shared, for example, cards received, perfume or aftershave, shells from a beach holiday, tickets from an outing, an item of clothing or jewellery, flowers from the funeral and photographs. Similarly, they can make a scrapbook which can contain pictures, drawings, tickets, postcards, letters and certificates - all important keepsakes. Every time the child turns over the items in the box or a page of the scrap book, they are turning over the memories of the person in their mind and thus keeping their memories alive.

Using play and art to tell their story

Play and art are natural activities that children and young people can use to express their feelings and their understanding of what happened. Through play with dolls, figures or puppets younger children may be able to tell their story. Older children may prefer to tell their story through art activities or writing a letter saying how they are feeling. Listening to them telling the story gives you the chance to correct any misunderstanding, to provide additional information and to answer any questions.

Common Problems that can occur after a death

Sleeping difficulties

Children and young people can experience difficulties sleeping. Like adults, this can be both in getting to sleep or having disturbing dreams. Offering support and reassurance can be a great comfort.

Anxiety on being separated from trusted adults

Bereaved children and young people can become very concerned about being apart from trusted adults such as their parent(s), carers and siblings after a death. They may worry that other people will also die or in some way disappear from their lives.

When leaving the child, always mention something about what you will do later when you meet again, for example, saying something like, 'after school we will do....' or 'when I pick you up later, we will do....' Having a glimpse of the future that includes both of you can be comforting.

When do children and young people need more help?

Sharing feelings and thoughts about the person who has died will help most children and young people cope with the death of a loved one or friend. Seeking professional help may be necessary if the range of natural reactions has not disappeared or become severe. Examples of these severe reactions are that they:

- stop eating or sleeping
- are harming others
- are self-harming
- are abusing substances
- express a wish to die as a way of being with the person who has died

To get more help your family doctor, school nurse and teachers are a good starting point.

Other Sources of Help

Further advice and activities can be found on the following helplines and websites:

Cruse Bereavement Care (Wales)

Tel: 0808 808 1677 (Helpline)

01792 462 845 (Swansea Office)

www.cruse.org.uk

Cruse Youth

Tel: 0808 808 1677

www.hopeagain.org.uk

Sibs

www.sibs.org.uk

The Child Bereavement Charity

Tel: 0800 0288 840 (Helpline)

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Together for Short Lives

Tel: 0808 8088 100 (Helpline)

www.togetherforshortlives.org.uk

Winston's Wish

Tel: 08088 020 021 (Helpline)

www.winstonswish.org

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