

Supporting children through bereavement

Advice for carers and schools



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Introduction:

The following document was drawn up for teachers, adults and carers who support a child or children who have experienced loss or bereavement. The purpose of this document is not to make you grief counselling specialists, but to attempt to answer questions that may arise during this difficult time. Most children and young people are able to cope with grief through the support of their families, friends and school and without the need for external counselling. Nevertheless, there are some things that you can consider before setting out to support children during this time.

Grief is a natural process that happens to everyone at some point in their lives. Children (and adults) all respond to loss and trauma in different and unique ways. This can depend on several factors such as age, awareness level, understanding, emotional maturity and their relationship with the departed.

It is important to bear in mind that many children think in a much more 'black and white' way than adults do, and therefore it is possible that some may ask blunt, frank questions. Remember that it is entirely normal not to be able to answer every question, nor improve the situation, but we can make it a little less painful or confusing for them.

Important note: Not every point below will be relevant to every situation but hopefully it will provide you with a framework to think of how to react in your own unique situation.

Important points

- Each child and each adult is unique and responds to bereavement in different ways. It is important to tailor the support to the child rather than employing the same techniques to support every child.
- Use language that is suited to the child's level of understanding. It is important to use concrete language so that you don't confuse the child, i.e. using language such as 'has died' is better than 'is sleeping' or 'has gone' as this could confuse children.
- Try to agree on consistent language that you will use with key members of the child's family/school. It is important to do this so that children do not receive mixed messages that could lead to them losing their faith in adults.
- Be honest, if you don't know the answer to a question, say so.
- It needs to be accepted that the feelings of a grieving child could differ to your feelings.
- Sometimes, it is better so say nothing, as there are no words that can console and ease the pain. Sometimes, your presence can mean more than words.
- Be prepared to listen if they want to talk. Very often, children who are grieving need to tell their story several times. You can help them by listening without judging and without interrupting.
- Give them time to grieve as there is nothing to gain by rushing the process.
- If you are too emotional, ask someone else to take your place for a while.
- Try to keep things as they are and keep to the usual routine.
- When a child is hurting, there may be a temptation to relax the rules and boundaries, but it is important to retain a structure in a young person's life in order to keep as much of their lives as 'normal' as possible.
- Show love, care and consistency at all times.
- Tell the child that strong feelings are a natural part of the grieving process.
- Try to share happy memories (encourage them to talk about happy times and good memories of the departed person).
- Ensure that the child understands that the pain of losing loved ones is part of life and not something to be ashamed of.
- Remember that there may be a delay before some respond to their grief and remember that there is no single timetable for dealing with loss.

Children's understanding

Children's understanding of death changes as they grow older. Having said this, the outline below is not definitive; it is more important to take your child's general level of understanding into account rather than the chronological age.

Pre-school

- Influenced by the emotions of the adults around them.
- Responding to loss rather than death
- Don't understand the meaning of death nor how final it is
- Don't understand abstract concepts such as 'soul' or 'heaven'
- Appearing sad perhaps but only for short periods; maybe processing things through play; regressing in their development is possible
- It is important to have a firm routine and boundaries, and lots of comfort and assurance

How to help:

- Look after your own emotions and well-being as a carer
- Use clear and concrete language
- Keep as 'normal' a daily routine as possible

Primary-age children

- Beginning to understand the finality of death
- Beginning to fear their own death and that of others
- Feeling guilty or displaying 'magical thinking' (i.e. thinking that it is possible for their thoughts and behaviour to cause or prevent somebody's death)
- A lack of language to describe the complex feelings that they have
- Children may ask very specific questions about what happened in an attempt to make sense of the situation. It is also possible that they will repeat questions (this can be difficult for the adults)
- Perhaps processing things through play (hospital/funeral role-play, etc.)
- It is important to have a firm routine, specific boundaries, comfort and assurance

How to help:

- Keep as 'normal' a daily routine as possible
 - Be as honest as is appropriate for their developmental level (use language such as 'has died' rather than 'has gone to sleep')
 - Model appropriate language to describe feelings (e.g. 'I feel sad because Grandma died, do you feel sad sometimes?')
- Answer questions in a clear and honest way and make sure that the child understands that there is nothing he or she could have done to 'save' the person

Secondary-age children

- Understanding the finality of death and as a consequence, possibly feeling low/overwhelmed by big feelings
- Perhaps obsessing over thoughts of their own death or that of others
- Sometimes taking part in high-risk behaviour (e.g. drugs or alcohol)
- Perhaps finding it difficult to discuss their feelings or accept help from adults
- Wanting some control over what is happening at school and at home
- Throwing themselves into school work or rejecting any educational and social activities

How to help:

- Keep as 'normal' a daily routine as possible
- Speak clearly and explain to them what happened (do not try to 'protect' them too much from the truth)
- Encourage them to process the grief and discuss their feelings, modelling this yourselves. If they do not want to talk to you (they may not want to make you sad), suggest that they talk to others or use different ways to remember the person (ideas are included later on in the booklet)

General points to remember when breaking the news to children/young people:

- Try to prepare the child that you are about to break bad news, e.g. 'I have something sad to tell you'
- Use clear language such as 'has died' rather than 'has gone to sleep', imprecise language can cause children confusion
- Provide the information as questions arise, do not provide too much information bearing in mind your child's developmental level
- Explaining what 'has died' means can help, e.g. 'She was ill and then her heart stopped, so her body didn't work anymore'
- Console your child that it is right to ask questions and that you will do your best to answer them. However, if you are not sure how to answer a question, it is also right to say 'I'm not sure, I'll come back to you'

Natural responses

Grief is a natural response to losing someone we love. It can be a confusing and overwhelming experience that affects us emotionally, physically, behaviourally and, in some cases, spiritually. There are several models available that attempt to explain grief but many of them oversimplify the process. Below, therefore, is a list of the ways in which a child or young person can respond to bereavement. It is important to note that you can jump from one response to another, take steps back, and repeat similar responses from time to time. There is no logical order to grief, and it is important to console the child/young person that all responses are entirely normal


Emotional responses:


- Shock, numbness
- Denial, disbelief (talking about the person in the present tense)
- Panic, anxiety at separation from carers (worrying about the lives of the people closest to them)
- Sadness - weepy, emotional outbursts
- Anger - towards the person who has died, or blaming others
- Guilt - blaming themselves (e.g. worried about the last thing they said to the person)
- Fatigue - the emotional weight of grief can be very tiring
- Feeling helpless - things feeling out of control, feeling without hope


Behavioural/physical responses:


- Loss of appetite, fatigue, lack of self-care
- Separation anxiety - refusing to leave carers, refusing to leave familiar places
- Refusing to attend school
- Becoming aggressive (verbally or physically)
- Regressing in development (e.g. starting wetting/soiling again, behaving like a much younger child)
- A lack of motivation, withdrawing from educational activities, activities that they usually enjoy, social situations, etc


How to support children/young people through bereavement


 Look after yourselves. If you feel vulnerable, and do not feel that you can support your child, ask someone else to be there to support you too


 The most important thing to support children who are affected by death is to have adults around them who love them and care for them. You cannot ease the pain, but you can help them through the process.

 Questions are important, this is how children learn. One good way of helping children process is to acknowledge what has happened and then give the child/young person the opportunity to ask any questions they may have. Remember that some questions may seem blunt/frank, but this is because children do not have the same understanding of death as adults do.

 Answer any questions with clear language, and try to answer them honestly. Try to use clear terms such as 'has died' and explain what this means, instead of using figures of speech such as 'has gone to sleep' or 'isn't here anymore'. If you do not have the answer to a question, say so.

 Do not try to hide your own feelings. If you feel sad, tell the child this. This may give them 'permission' to feel and discuss things too.

 Give them time to 'be children'. Time for them to 'forget about the grief' is important. This may involve opportunities to play, do physical exercise, be outdoors, or simply to have a chance at school not to talk about it.

 If you feel uncertain which steps to take, ask the child. If you are unsure how to tell the other children at the school, or whether or not you should have a memorial service, ask the child what he or she would prefer (if this is appropriate to their age). In addition to this, do not avoid talking about the person, or about topics involving the person who has died, in class. The child may feel that you are ignoring the fact that the person ever existed. Again, ask the child initially what he/she would prefer.

Practical ideas to help the grieving process

The importance of remembering - Grief is not a process of forgetting about the person who has died, but a process of finding ways of remembering him or her. By remembering, the emotional wounds can begin to heal. Thinking of creative ways of remembering is a great help to children and adults. There is no appropriate or inappropriate way of remembering. At its best, it is a profound personal expression of their love towards the special person they have lost but who remains alive within them.



Memory box - buy or make a special box and fill it with valuable items such as letters or cards from friends, dried flowers following the funeral, photographs or items that the person who has died cherished - such as an item of jewellery, glasses, diary or letter.

Visiting the grave - To some, this is a very important part of the process of grieving for the person who died. This can be a way of maintaining a link with him or her, putting the rest of the world to one side, and communicating with them. For example, by telling their story, expressing their sadness and displaying their love by placing flowers or other gifts on the grave.

Memory book - It is a good idea to create a special book in memory of the person who died. It could contain pictures, poems, letters and comments. Children and young people can look through it to help them remember and think about that person.



Planting trees and shrubs - Some like the idea of planting a tree or shrub as a way of remembering. It is important to choose a hardy tree or shrub that it less likely to die. It is also important to plant these in a place that the children can easily visit.

Art work - It can help some to do art work and frame it to remember their loved ones. The process of doing something special forges a link between the person who is grieving and the person who died, and creates something that the bereaved person can cherish in future.



Candles - One simple but powerful way of remembering the person who died at special times is by lighting a candle or reading a poem or prayer.

Keeping a diary - It can be useful for bereaved people to write a diary of their experience of grieving, for a number of reasons. The process of expressing their feelings in words can help ease the pain to some extent. In time, it will be useful for them to look back at what they felt before - and remember the experience.

Bereavement Box offers a wide variety of activities and ideas to enable children and young people to remember and celebrate - including all the suggestions above. Parents and carers can also use this resource and adapt it to suit their own circumstances. For information about the resources, please read pages 24-26 of the following guide:

https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf

Useful resources and websites:

Storybooks:

'Y Goeden Gofio' - Ceri Wyn Jones

'Sad Book' - Michael Rosen

'The Invisible String' - Patrice Kars & Joanne Lew-Vriethoff

'Badger's Parting Gifts' - Susan Varley

Websites:

<http://childbereavementuk.org/>

<http://www.cruse.org.uk/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>

<http://www.suddendeath.org/>