understanding bereaved children and young people

This information has been written specifically for bereaved families and professionals who support them

working to help bereaved families
How children respond to the death of an important person in their life depends on a number of factors:

- their age and consequent understanding of death
- the nature of their relationship with the person who has died
- the circumstances of the death
- the reaction of other family members to the death
- the overall effect on the family unit
- their culture and family’s spiritual beliefs
- their self-esteem and self-worth

“That day I began to look at how my future might be in a different way”
(on learning of a parent’s diagnosis)

communicating with children

The decision is not whether to talk to children or not, but who will do the talking, when and how, as it is impossible for parents not to communicate with children. They read body language, overhear conversations and notice how adults behave. Momentous situations in a family cause changes and children quickly sense when something serious is happening.

Ideally parents are the best people to talk about sad news with their children, but if they are unable to do this then a close relative or friend known to the child would be most helpful, although sometimes this difficult task falls to the health professional caring for the person who is dying or has died. It needs to be sensitively explained as soon as possible so that the children don’t find out inadvertently from someone else or are left for hours anxiously wondering what has happened. It is important to try and find out what the children already know or have been told. Ideally a place that is free from disturbance needs to be found with sufficient time set aside to explain what has happened, to answer questions and to offer comfort and reassurance.

When talking to children it is important to remember that touch is a valuable way of communicating and to recognise the comfort that physical closeness can bring. Try to find the right moment with children when they feel more able to listen or to concentrate on what you are saying. Pick up on their cues or wait until they ask a leading question. What is said will depend on the age of the child, but particularly with younger children what has happened needs to be made very clear so there is no chance for misunderstanding. Euphemisms such as “gone to sleep” or “Daddy has passed away” are not helpful.

The rate at which information is given should be varied according to the children’s level of understanding and open ended questions can be used to encourage them to respond and ask questions. Picking up on particular things the child has said and asking them more about what it means to them, helps to ensure the child has understood what has been said. The information given must be truthful and consistent. Children do not need long detailed information but easy to understand explanations.

Children and young people, like adults, will experience shock and disbelief and may not take in everything at once. They will listen to as little or as much as they can bear at any one time. They are likely to need repeated explanations with spaces to enable them to understand the information. They may want to spend some time on their own. Young people need to be told what is likely to happen next and who is going to be there to help them. If the death has occurred in a hospital setting, clear information needs to be given about the opportunity of returning at a later date to ask questions from the nurses and doctors they have met.

Children’s reactions can vary from deep despair to denial or active protest. Whatever their reaction, it is important that they are allowed to express their feelings without being stopped or urged to “be brave.”

When deciding whether children should see the person who has died, parents may be concerned that frightening memories of the dead person will be powerful and children will be more upset – this is unlikely to be the case, especially if the children have been prepared for what to expect. Experience shows that children focus on the positive aspects of the person who has died and work to build up an image of them that they can carry with them into the future.
Factual explanations of death are helpful. “When people die it means their body doesn’t work any more and although they will look like they are asleep, they are not asleep, they are dead, because when you are just asleep your body works very well.” It is useful to explain that when people are dead they may feel cold to touch and there may be other noticeable differences.

“I was glad I was with my sister when she died. I was scared, but I wanted to be there to say goodbye.”

(A young person speaking at The Child Bereavement Trust advisory group)

reactions to the death

Children’s capacity to sustain sad emotions increases with age and maturity. Apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe they are unaffected by the loss. Normal signs of grief in children, particularly young children, include bed wetting, loss of appetite, tummy upsets, restlessness, disturbed sleep, nightmares, crying, attention-seeking behaviour, difficulty concentrating, increased anxiety and clinginess. These only become a cause for concern when they occur over a prolonged period of time.

Older children often display changes in personality and alterations in psychosocial functioning including depressive mood, sleep and appetite disturbances, angelic behaviour, rudeness, learning problems, lack of concentration and refusal to go to school. School work may be affected by underachieving or overworking. Boys, particularly teenagers, are likely to experience academic difficulties in the early months following parental death, but bereaved children do not necessarily develop long-term learning problems.

In adolescents, bereavement can cause a regression to a younger, more dependent stage in their development. Emotions may be suppressed, resulting in a display of apparent indifference or lack of feelings. In a search for love and affection, they may develop premature new sexual relationships. Some teenagers start truanting, turn to petty delinquency or begin shop-lifting as a general protest against the upheaval in their family life. This is more likely in adolescents who have lost their mother, particularly girls. Others become silent, withdrawn and self-critical. Many young people will grieve privately and shed their tears in the solitude of their own rooms, maintaining a brave face in society.

In an attempt to numb the pain some youngsters develop self-destructive behaviour such as excessive drinking or drug taking. Reaction to the fear of death may cause some teenagers to take unnecessary chances with their lives. By confronting death they try to overcome their fears and demonstrate their control over their own mortality. Some children will assume the role of a parent taking on heavy responsibilities causing them to mature rapidly and denying themselves the opportunity or permission to grieve. Others will take this experience in their stride.

Often after a major bereavement children suffer some form of depression and a loss of confidence and it is important to help build up their resilience. Life has dealt them a terrible blow and they may feel incapable of carrying on. They need help to examine their own skills and acknowledge the things they are good at, to focus on the positive things that they can do, however small, to improve the situation. Although they may have lost an important person in their life, they can usually find other support mechanisms, such as a favourite relative, a close friend, a special teacher and draw strength from them. This will all help to bolster their self-esteem and self-efficacy and enable them to face life again.

A suicide in the family is a particularly difficult type of bereavement – all the normal grief reactions are likely to be intensified. Because suicide carries a stigma it makes it especially difficult to talk about. It is common for children whose parent has died by suicide to feel responsible in some way for what has happened, or to think that they could have prevented it. Living with this burden of guilt may cause them to become depressed, passive and self-destructive. Children suffering bereavement through violent death (murder, suicide, etc) are more likely to need specialist professional help, both at the time of the death and also in the years to come, as they mature and reflect on the death and why it happened.

“You never get the whole story. The doctors don’t tell you and your parents can’t tell you because they’re in pain.”

the importance of memories

Memories are vital to the grieving process. Talking about the dead person, revisiting places they used to go to together, looking at photographs, handling clothes they used to wear and evoking familiar smells all help to keep the inner image of the person alive. Young children find it difficult to call up memories without contextual cues and protective adults may fail to provide these in an effort not to remind children of their loss, but this can inhibit their mourning. They need something that belonged to the dead person as a memento of their relationship to keep the dead person present in their lives, and opportunities to recall them on special days and anniversaries and add to their memories. As children mature it is normal for them to experience new feelings about the person who has died and miss them in different ways at different times in their life.

“In the beginning, I had difficulty remembering the last time I saw her and what she looked like, but the things I forgot came back weeks later.”

(re death of a friend)
attending the funeral

Everyone comes from a culture, not only a national culture and a religious culture, but a family culture as well. The bereaved family may be agnostic or atheist, Catholic or Church of England, Muslim or Jewish, Hindu or Sikh. Each group will have its own traditions that need to be honoured. The best advice is to assume nothing and when in doubt, ask and people outside of the family should refrain from forcing their personal beliefs which may contradict those of the parents. It is important to recognise also that adolescence is a time of questioning and challenging, and young people may not share the same beliefs as their parents.

Although some parents and grandparents may feel that children need to be protected from being present at the funeral, children usually find it helpful to be included in the family's rituals of mourning. The funeral is an opportunity for them to witness friends and family show their respect for the dead parent or sibling and for the family together to start to learn to live without the dead person. To be excluded from these events can widen the gap between the grieving parents and the child. However a child who is frightened about attending a funeral should not be pressured or forced to do so. Some other way needs to be found for the child to say goodbye to the dead person – such as putting a letter or flowers in the coffin, lighting a candle, choosing a poem or visiting the grave.

If children wish to attend the funeral, thought needs to be given to preparing them for what will happen and the service needs to be child-friendly. They need to be told that people will be sad and cry, and be given the opportunity to ask questions. They may like to take an active part in the service by choosing a favourite song or reading. It is often a good idea to arrange for a caring adult of their choice to be responsible for looking after them during the service so that the parents do not have to have this responsibility.

“...the whole funeral was organised by Mum and Dad and the church...I didn’t get a chance to be a part of anything”

helping bereaved children at school

Schools are an important part of children's lives, they act like a second family providing security and routine when everything else changes. After discussion with the family and with the child's permission and knowledge, the rest of the class should be told as soon as possible about their classmate's bereavement. It is a good idea to let the parents of their classmates know what has happened as they may well have to answer their own children's questions and worries about death.

The class teacher may like to talk to the child's special friends and discuss ways in which they could be supportive, modelling how to behave in this situation. This open acknowledgement helps and may then enable them to talk to their friends rather than being embarrassed by the situation and trying to ignore it.

“When the child returns to school their loss needs to be acknowledged and then everything needs to be kept as normal as possible with no special privileges shown. School may be the one place that children can escape the grief surrounding them. However the child should be given the opportunity to talk to a sympathetic adult or have a quiet time should the need arise. The class teacher should keep in regular contact with the bereaved child's parents, informing them of how their child is managing at school. It is normal for changes in the child's behaviour to occur, however some may need special attention:

- vulnerability and a tendency to tears at the least little thing
- mood swings
- becoming withdrawn and daydreaming
- psychosomatic symptoms
- lack of concentration
- poor school work
- overworking

Changes in behaviour may not occur immediately after the bereavement but may manifest themselves months or even years after the event – children revisit grief at different stages of their development. Teachers need to be aware when the death occurred and be sensitive to special days which may be difficult for the child e.g. the anniversary of the death, Father's or Mother's Day, Christmas, birthdays.

Initially, some bereaved children may refuse to go to school at all because they feel they can't face their friends and the possible questions which will be asked. They feel different and are unsure about the reception they will receive. They may also be clinging obsessively to their remaining family members in case someone else should die. This may lead some children to truant. Others may adopt bullying behaviour as a protest against their painful emotions. These children need additional help and support, time to adjust to the situation and an opportunity to talk about what is bothering them when they are able to.
how to help children manage a bereavement

Children need:

➟ age appropriate factual information
➟ clear, honest explanations, which may need to be repeated
➟ adults who are able to show their feelings
➟ a chance to ask questions more than once
➟ help to express their feelings – through talking, playing, drawing
➟ advice on how to cope with other children’s questions and adults’ expressions of sadness
➟ a break from the company of grief stricken relatives
➟ general support
➟ help with other losses
➟ a familiar routine, to establish a feeling of normality
➟ regular reassurance
  - that the death was not their fault
  - that they are loved and wanted
  - that life will go on and not always be sad
  - that feeling angry and upset are a part of grieving
  - that their surviving family members are healthy and are not likely to die until they are much older

It helps:

➟ not to make assumptions
➟ to remember children almost always understand more than we think
➟ to realise children read emotions around them, respond to body language and overhear snippets of conversation
➟ to understand children experience loss and death in many ways
➟ to include them
➟ to allow them to contribute
➟ to encourage them to say “goodbye” by allowing them to view the body, attend the funeral, visit the grave etc, providing they want to do so and have been prepared for the experience
➟ to talk about the dead person
➟ to create and reinforce memories over the years on anniversaries and special days
➟ to let them know you won’t suddenly disappear – explain carefully if you are going away
➟ to understand that bad behaviour is a symptom of confused emotions
➟ to accept them as they are
➟ to encourage them to build up their own resilience and self worth by telling children what you value in them
➟ to give them something special of their own to love and take care of, such as a pet
➟ to give permission for them to have fun

What can inhibit children’s grief:

➟ a parent’s or prime carer’s inability to grieve
➟ a parent’s inability to tolerate painful memories
➟ a parent’s overwhelming grief

special needs of young people

The adolescent years are a particularly difficult time to lose a parent or a sibling. It is a time of great change, both physically and emotionally. The teenager is struggling to achieve a balance between a desire to be independent and free thinking with feelings of low self esteem and lack of confidence. Although they may look and seem like adults, physical development does not equate to emotional maturity and coping with a death on top of the normal psychological, physiological and academic pressures they face can prove very difficult.

The death of a parent may destroy their sense of security and alter family life, taking away the one thing they could rely on in a changing world. Fears for the future become very real and suddenly they have to start worrying about things most people of their age never have to consider. They may well resent the upheaval in their life and these selfish thoughts will lead to feelings of guilt which will be difficult to acknowledge. If they had been going through a bad patch in their relationship with the dead parent or sibling this can also cause feelings of enormous guilt, or perhaps they may feel the wrong parent or person has died. Although very difficult to talk about, it is important that teenagers understand that these feelings are normal and that they are normal. Communicating effectively with teenagers can be hard for adults at the best of times and often because teenagers appear prickly and unresponsive, adults may back off leaving them to grieve alone with very limited support.

Young people may also be reluctant to talk freely to their friends, realising that death is a taboo subject and is likely to embarrass their peer group.

Their friends may be extremely supportive or just not know how to respond to the situation or how to comfort and support them. But it is important that they find someone, perhaps a
family friend, teacher, sports leader, doctor or minister that they like
and trust, to unburden themselves to. Having information about a
counselling service to call, and contact with and talking to other
bereaved young people, may also help a teenager feel less isolated.
They may prefer to express their emotions through writing a
journal, composing a poem, drawing a picture, or acting out a scene
in a play, rather than talking directly about how they feel.

Adolescents need to know that it is OK to:

➟ cry and feel depressed. They’ve lost a great deal. If their
feelings get too overwhelming they should find a caring adult
or a friend to talk it over with

➟ copy some of the activities and interests of their dead brother,
sister or parent, but they need to retain their own life too

➟ ‘live in the past’ for a while. It can help to keep alive the
memory of a parent, brother or sister, but they shouldn’t let
life pass them by

➟ have fun and enjoy life, to laugh again

➟ forgive themselves for the fights and arguments and nasty
things they said to their dead parent or sibling

➟ go on living

But it is NOT OK to:

➟ use drugs or alcohol to dull their senses. This can only hide the
pain, not heal it and it will take longer to accept the hurt

➟ act out their frustration with reckless driving or skipping school

➟ do things out of anger to hurt other people because they are
hurting themselves

➟ experiment with sex just to get close to someone

➟ hide their feelings and not talk about what is bothering them
to protect their parents

➟ act as the scapegoat or “bad guy” to appear tough

Signs that a young person may need extra help include:

➟ prolonged deterioration in relationships with family and friends

➟ risk taking behaviour such as drug and alcohol abuse, fighting
and sexual experimentation

➟ lack of interest in school and poor academic performance

➟ signs of chronic depression, sleeping difficulties
and low self esteem

➟ dropping the things that once meant so much to them

As they get older, children and teenagers may need to look again
at the details surrounding the death of someone important in their
lives. This is not necessarily unresolved grief, but the experience of
different feelings at a later stage in life.

If we listen to children, they will tell us what they need. There is
clear evidence that children can survive the pain of loss providing
they are loved and cared for.

www.childbereavement.org.uk

helpful resources available from the child bereavement trust

➟ When a child grieves – incorporating ‘Someone died – it happened to me’ video

➟ Teenage Guide to cope with Bereavement

➟ My book about our baby that died

➟ A Memory Box, Memory Wallet and ‘Caring for You’ Booklet

➟ This is about me

➟ School’s Information Pack

➟ The CBT Activity & Information Pack – Loss, Death & Grief

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