

## How to support a bereaved child/young person. A guide for school staff.

*We can never change what has happened or make everything better, but we can help the child to get through this difficult time.*

### Common Reactions

Children, like adults, will grieve when someone they care about dies. Every child's reactions will be different and right for them (providing they are not harming themselves or another). A child's reactions to death will be affected by a number of factors including their age, their relationship with the deceased person, the nature of the death, and their previous experiences of death.

Children may show shock, denial, yearning/pining, anger, low mood, guilt and anxiety. Children's mood may switch between upset and joy/laughter very quickly. Children may express their grief through their play and behaviour. Children may become very clingy and have difficulty separating from adults they are close to (they may be worried that something bad will happen again). Children may be more restless, distractible, and tired. Children may show a decrease in activity and loss in motivation. They may lose their appetite or feel unwell (these may be 'somatic' complaints, where grief or unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort). Some children may display seemingly inappropriate behaviour, such as laughing, but this may be their way of coping (e.g. they do not want to be seen to cry) or happen because they are still only learning how to express their emotions appropriately. When we experience a death of a loved one it makes us feel out of control and as a result some children, particularly older ones, may start to behave recklessly because they feel hopeless about their future. They may also desperately try to restore some sense of control by showing defiance.

Box 1.

**Grief may take the form of several common stages:**

- Shock and disbelief
- Denial
- Growing awareness- pining, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety.
- Acceptance

See hand-out 'Critical Incidents. Grieving. WSCC.'

### Support for children in the days after the death:

***Children will need emotional support from people who they are close to (e.g. family members and people at school).***

- Children are likely to need more comfort and reassurance around this time.
- If it is death of someone outside of school, let the child know that you are aware of what happened and ask them how they are feeling.
- Be available to listen if the child wants to talk or if they just want to sit quietly with someone (some children may also benefit from regular planned meetings with a key person in school).
- Some children will be more vulnerable and so staff should be vigilant for this (consider children who were close to the deceased person, those who witnessed the death, those who were emotionally vulnerable before the death, those who have experienced past bereavements).
- Bereaved children may feel isolated from their peers and so may need some help reconnecting with them.
- Most children do not need specialist help. Usually what they need more is to be with, and to talk to, people who they are close to and who they know well.

Box 2

#### Children's Understanding of Death

A child's perception of death is influenced by their age, intellectual level, social environment and life experience.

##### **Under 2 years-**

No concept of death. Death experienced as a separation from someone they have an attachment to.

##### **Aged 2-5 years-**

Believe death is temporary (e.g. *'the hamster's not moving but he'll play with me tomorrow'*). Believe death is reversible and show 'magical thinking' (believe they caused the death or that they can bring the person back) (e.g. *'I was angry at him when he left for work. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's all my fault', 'My mum will come back if I'm very good and eat my broccoli'*).

##### **Aged 6-9 years-**

Child begins to develop a concept of finality, irreversibility, inevitability and universality. Children at this stage may be very curious about death.

##### **Aged 9-13 years-**

Child begins to perceive death on an adult level.

***Children will need information about, and support to understand, what has happened.***

- Children will have some awareness about what happened and if they are not spoken to about it, will often imagine something far worse. The death should be explained to the child in an age- and developmentally-appropriate way. You may need to go through the chain of events with the child several times.
- Children develop an understanding of death as they grow older and typically children do not have a complete understanding of death until they are 9 years old (see Box 1). Younger children may need help to understand what death means (e.g. that the person is not coming back).
- To avoid confusion simple, factual and age-appropriate information should be given when explaining to the child what has happened. Younger children will need concrete information (e.g. “I have something very sad to tell you. [X] has died” [rather than ‘passed away’ or ‘we have lost X’], “When somebody dies they stop breathing and their body stops working so they can’t move or feel anything”). It may be necessary for the child to be given a little bit of information at a time so they have time to process what they have been told and so the adult can gauge when the child is ready to hear more. For instance, depending on the nature of the death, the adult may decide to say to the child “I will tell you more about what happened at another time”.
- Follow the child’s lead- if they ask questions about what has happened try to answer their questions as best you can (however it is ok to say “I don’t know” if you are unsure about the answer). The child may repeatedly ask the same questions as they take time to process and understand the news. Usually if the child is mature enough to ask the question then they are mature enough to hear the answer. Listen carefully to what the child says as this may identify some misconceptions they have about the death.
- Photos, TV programmes/films, and children’s books that cover the topic of death can be useful discussion tools and help the child to develop an understanding of death. Some children may benefit from having a personal story written for them about their specific experience. The child may like to draw or play about what has happened as it allows them to express what has happened in their own way.
- It is probably best not to give a personal viewpoint of what happens after death as families may have differing beliefs (e.g. if a child asks where is the person now, say “I don’t know” and perhaps suggest they talk to their parents about their beliefs).
- Use the method of communication that the child typically uses (e.g. children with severe disability may need help to understand what has happened using pictures and signs).
- Funerals can be as beneficial to children as they are to adults. It is usually best if children are given the option of attending funerals, and if they choose to go, it may be useful to: prepare them for what they may see; ensure there is a named person to support them during the funeral; and, give them the opportunity to discuss the funeral afterwards.

***Help the child to express, and understand, their feelings-***

- Be available for the child when they want to talk. Just listening to the child without interruption can provide a great deal of comfort. Some children may need a key person who they can meet with at regular times.
- Accept and encourage the expression of feelings and help the child to recognise, name and differentiate between their own feelings. Reassure them that grief is made up of many different feelings and that it is okay to be sad or angry. If necessary, help the child find more appropriate ways to express their feelings (e.g. punching a cushion, going outside and shouting at the top of their voice.)
- Watch out for changes in the child’s behaviour that may be signs of grief, and help the child to understand their feelings and reactions (“I think you are feeling sad/cross/worried because...”, “When people we care about die, we often feel ....”).

- If you feel upset about the death, do not be afraid to show your own feelings; showing the child that you feel sad, helps them to understand that their own reactions are normal.
- Use activities and books to help the child explore their feelings and ideas about death. Some children will find it easier to express their feelings through nonverbal activities, e.g. art, music.
- Let the child know that it is ok if they want to laugh and have fun.

#### ***Restore some sense of normality and security-***

- Keeping daily routines as consistent as possible will help restore the child's sense of safety and security. It is often best if the child can go back to school relatively quickly although initially it may be necessary to offer less demanding activities/longer breaks.
- Be sensitive that the child's grief may affect their learning and behaviour but, although you should show patience and understanding, it is also important to continue to have in place normal expectations and boundaries.

#### ***Remembering the person who has died-***

- Continuing to talk about the person who has died and looking at photos/videos is important as it will help the child to remember the deceased in a positive way and to process what has happened. The child could be helped to create a Memory Box full of items that help them to remember the deceased.
- Memorial activities will also help the child to come to terms with the death and to speak openly about their feelings.

#### **Support for children in the coming weeks:**

- Be prepared to go over the same information several times as the child tries to process the news.
- Acknowledge that some days/times will be better than others for the child.
- Ensure all staff are aware of the child's circumstances and possible reactions.
- Beware of the child becoming isolated at play/lunchtimes and, if necessary, help the child to find a supportive peer group.

#### **Support for children in the coming months and years:**

- Be mindful that significant events/dates/anniversaries may be more difficult for the child.
- Remembering the person who has died can help the healing process, so ensure the child has the opportunity to talk about the person, share memories and remember special anniversaries.
- Be aware that the child may be more emotionally vulnerable if they experience a subsequent loss/bereavement.
- Watch out for signs of delayed mourning.
- If the child experiences severe symptoms that continue for more than *4 weeks* they may need more specialist support.

#### **Support for children prior to the death (when a family member is known to be dying):**

- It is best if the child is given clear and accurate information about the impending death (for younger children, it may be useful if they are read children's books that cover issues similar to theirs).

- Give the child time to get used to the idea and provide opportunities for them to say goodbye. It can be helpful to the child if they are able to visit the dying person though they should be provided with appropriate support during these times.
- Provide the child with the opportunity to talk about the impending death and answer their questions the best you can.
- Staff who work with the child should try to keep informed about what is happening with regards to the condition of the person who is dying.

#### **Further advice/support:**

- The Educational Psychology Service may be able to offer further information and advice to adults who are supporting bereaved children.
- Winston's wish is a childhood bereavement charity ([www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk), the national helpline is 01242 515 157 and the contact number for the South East branch is 01273 805035.)
- Cruse Bereavement Care is a national charity that provides advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved ([www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk), national helpline is 0808 808 1677 and the contact number for the branch in mid Sussex is 0300 311 9959).
- JIGSAW4U is based in East Grinstead and provides grief support for Children and Families ([www.jigsaw4u.org.uk](http://www.jigsaw4u.org.uk), 01342 313895).

#### **Useful Resources:**

- Atyle Dyregrov has written some very good books (Dyregrov, A. 2008. Grief in Children. Dyregrov, A. 2008. Grief in Young Children.
- There are many resources available from Winston's Wish including the 'Schools Information Pack' [https://www.winstonswish.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Schools\\_Information\\_Pack.pdf](https://www.winstonswish.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Schools_Information_Pack.pdf) and 'Supporting a bereaved child or young person. A guide for parents and carers.'
- A helpful resource for people working with children who have a learning disability is 'Hand-In-Hand. Supporting Children and Young People who have a learning difficulty through the experience of bereavement' ([www.seesaw.org.uk/files/SeeSaw\\_handinhand.pdf](http://www.seesaw.org.uk/files/SeeSaw_handinhand.pdf)).

#### ***Books for children***

- A useful book for younger children is 'I'll Always Love You' by Hans Wilhelm, 1985 or 'Goodbye Mouse' by Robie Harris and for older children 'The Charlie Barber Treatment' by Carole Lloyd, 1997.
- 'Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine' by Diana Crossley is an activity book to help the child remember the deceased.
- Sheila Hollins has written some useful books for young children and those with special needs ('When Mum Died', 'When Dad Died', 'When Somebody Dies')
- Cruse has a website that older children may find helpful ([www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)) and there is also a leaflet for young people 'After Someone Dies' ([https://www.cruse.org.uk/sites/default/files/default\\_images/pdf/Free-leaflets/AfterSomeoneDies-forYoungPeople.pdf](https://www.cruse.org.uk/sites/default/files/default_images/pdf/Free-leaflets/AfterSomeoneDies-forYoungPeople.pdf))

Dr Amy Farrer  
Educational Psychologist  
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