



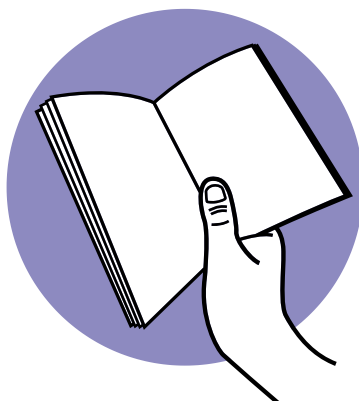
NI
Bereavement
Network

Supporting Children & Young People Through Grief & Bereavement



A resource for parents and carers

We would like to offer our sincere condolences to you, your family and friends following the death of someone important to you. We acknowledge this can be a very difficult time.



This booklet has been written for parents / carers to offer guidance as you support children and young people through grief. It provides information that may help you in responding to your child or young person after a death.

Information in this booklet draws on guidance from:

- Child Bereavement UK: <https://childbereavementuk.org>
- Irish Childhood Bereavement: <https://irishchildhoodbereavement.ie>
- Bereaved NI: <https://bereaved.hscni.net>

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Children and Young People's Understanding of Death

Children and young people experience similar feelings and emotions as adults when someone close to them dies. How they show these feelings and emotions will, however, often differ and this can be confusing for parents, carers and other adults.

Children feel grief, but their understanding changes as they grow. Their responses are shaped by age, development, personality and circumstances of death. This can be described as “puddle jumping” in and out of their grief. This response is normal, and it is important that they are given the opportunity to express their grief in their own time.



As an adult it can be difficult to cope with a child or young person's changing mood, as adults may tend to be consistently sad. Providing a safe space to ask questions and express feelings may help children process grief and build healthy coping strategies.

Children & Young Peoples response to their loss will be influenced by their understanding of death, as outlined in the following section

Babies and Toddlers (0–2 years)



Understanding

Very young children are sensitive to absence and changes in their environment. Babies do not understand the concept of death, but they notice when a familiar caregiver is no longer there and can be unsettled by disruption in routines or by changes in their carer's emotions.

Behaviour

- Becoming more dependent or unsettled.
- Increased crying and disrupted sleeping or feeding.
- From around eight months, babies may begin to look for the person who has died, showing distress through crying or withdrawal.

How to Help



- Offer comfort through holding, soothing, consistency and calm presence.
- Maintain familiar routines as much as possible.
- Provide a sense of safety by responding promptly to needs.

Young Children (2–5 years)



Understanding

Children at this age may notice the death of an animal or insect and may use the words ‘dying’ or ‘dead’. They may recognise that this is different from being alive, but they cannot yet grasp that death is permanent. They may ask repeatedly when the person is coming back, or worry that the person still feels cold, hunger or pain. Because children think literally, avoid phrases such as “gone to sleep” or “gone away” which may cause confusion or fears; honest, simple explanations are best.

Behaviour

- Strong emotional reactions to their own grief and to the grief of adults around them
- Heightened separation anxiety
- Regression in skills (e.g. toilet training, speech)
- Sleep disturbances or new fears (such as fear of the dark)
- Expectations that the person will return, leading to sadness or frustration when this does not happen



How to Help

- Provide short, clear explanations and repeat as needed
- Reassure them that the person who died no longer feels cold, hunger or pain
- Keep a routine to give a sense of security
- Encourage play, drawing and storytelling as natural ways of expressing feelings

Primary School Aged Children (5–11 years)



Understanding

By around age five to seven, children begin to understand that death is permanent and irreversible. If bereaved at a younger age, children may need to re-process their grief as their awareness of death grows. They also become aware that death is part of life, which can sometimes lead to new worries about their own health or that of loved ones.

Behaviour

- Magical thinking: believing their thoughts or actions caused the death, or that wishing hard enough could reverse it
- Guilt /self-blame: trying to “make up for it” by being extra good, or misbehaving to attract punishment
- Adult responsibilities: stepping into caring role for others
- Anxiety: worrying about safety, illness, or further loss
- Filling gaps: creating their own explanations, if information is lacking



How to Help

- Reassure them that nothing they did or thought caused the death
- Give honest, developmental and age-appropriate information
- Encourage questions and be patient with repetition
- Provide opportunities to be creative, such as drawing, play or writing
- Maintain clear routines and expectations

Teenagers (12+ years)

Understanding

Young people are in a stage of transition from dependence to independence. The death of someone close can make young people feel vulnerable at a time when they are striving for independence. Most teenagers have an adult awareness of death; but may challenge explanations given to them. They may want the opportunity to form their own understanding.

Bereavement can feel isolating as teenagers often dislike being seen as “different” from peers. Support from others of a similar age with shared experiences can be very valuable



Behaviour

- Withdrawal and reluctance to talk
 - Anger or “acting out” behaviour
 - Risk-taking or anti-social behaviour as an attempt to cope
 - Taking on caring roles for siblings or surviving adults
 - Loss of motivation or “what’s the point?” attitude
- Immersion in an overly busy social life to avoid grief, though feelings may resurface suddenly or months to years after the death.



How to Help



- Keep clear rules and boundaries, which offer stability and routine
- Be available and patient without forcing conversations
- Encourage positive outlets such as sport, creative activities or music
- Signpost to peer support or bereavement groups for young people
- Explain to young people that grief is a normal response to a death and that with support, they will be able to manage their bereavement.

Telling Children & Young People about the death of someone close

Parents / carers frequently describe feeling uncertain regarding how to tell children about a death. While there is no formula for how to do this; the following guidelines may be helpful.

It is helpful for parents / carers to discuss what they wish to tell a child or young person before speaking with them; to ensure they receive the same explanation from everyone.

Talk with your child or young person as soon as possible after a death. If you wait too long, there is a risk of your child finding out from others, or sensing something is wrong.

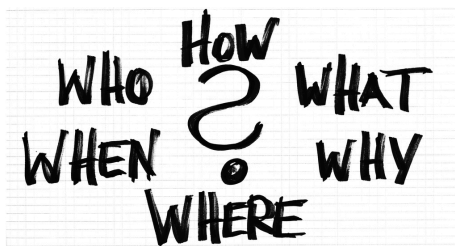


It is important to be as open and honest as possible and to explain clearly what has happened in a language that children can understand.

The amount of information that a child or young person requires depends on their age and ability. Young children do not need complicated explanations, and it can be sufficient to say, for example “[Name] was ill, and the doctors and nurses tried to make them better, but [Name] was so sick that they died”.

Older children and adolescents may require more detailed explanations. Young children may be curious about the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of death. Older children and young people may ask about ‘how’ and ‘why’ the person died.

It is important to use the word ‘death’ or ‘dead’ rather than statements such as ‘gone to sleep’, ‘we have lost them’ or ‘they have gone on a journey’. These statements may cause confusion, particularly for young children who can take them literally and become distressed or frightened of going to sleep, getting lost or going on a journey.



It can be helpful to tell a younger child that when a person dies, their body does not work anymore, and they no longer need air to breathe and they no longer feel hunger, thirst, pain, heat or cold.

It is normal for children to show concern about their own future, and they may ask questions such as, ‘Can I still go to my friend’s birthday party?’ or ‘Who will collect me from swimming?’ It is helpful to offer reassurance about continuing routines where possible or give clear explanations about the need to make other plans.

Helping Children & Young People say goodbye to someone close

You may feel unsure whether it would be helpful for your child or young person to see the deceased person after death or to attend the funeral. Parents / carers frequently describe this as a difficult decision that needs to be made at a time when they too are grieving. Each situation is individual, and people may have different views.

This is a very emotional time for families, and it can be helpful to ensure that you have some private time together.

Children should be given the opportunity to say goodbye in a manner that is appropriate for them and the circumstances around the death. It is important that children or young people are well prepared for saying goodbye and are accompanied by a trusted adult who is comfortable with supporting them and answering any questions they may have.



From research and talking with children and young people who have been bereaved, it is suggested that children are given the option to see the deceased person and to be involved in the funeral, if it is deemed appropriate for their age and development.



Children and young people may need to discuss how they feel about seeing the person after death or attending the funeral. It is helpful to give children a clear description of the coffin, the room, who will be there and who will be with them. It is important to talk to them about what the person may look like, for example, what they will be wearing and how their skin changes colour and becomes cold. This may support the child or young person's decision making.

Some children prefer to keep their distance when they see a deceased person. It is important that they know that it is okay to touch the person who has died, unless you have been advised that touching the body is not recommended, due to the cause of death.

It can be helpful for children to be given the opportunity to have something of special meaning placed in the coffin, for example, a card, toy, poem, drawing or gift.



Children and young people may not wish to see the person after death. It is important to gently explore the reasons behind this. It may be due to fear, emotional distress, or a wish to remember them as they were. If fear is the main factor, sensitive support may help them feel more comfortable. However, it is equally valid for a child to choose not to see the person who has died, and that decision should be respected.

Children and young people may wish to be involved in the funeral service, for example, choosing music and readings; and this can be helpful for them as they process their grief. It is important for children to know what will happen at the funeral and to be given the opportunity to ask questions.

Children & Young People needs following the death of someone close

Meeting the needs of your child or young person following a death, when you are grieving, can be overwhelming. It is important that you are gentle with yourself and remember that you too may need support. Children who are bereaved may have varying needs; some of the information below may be helpful to you:

After a death younger children may have difficulty separating from parents / carers. It is helpful for children to get hugs, cuddles and emotional reassurance from family and to know that they are loved and will be cared for.

Re-establishing or creating routines, for example, bedtime, mealtimes, daily activities will help your children. Children feel reassured when you communicate with them and they know what to expect; routines will help with this.



Children may experience disturbed sleep following a death; nightmares are not uncommon, and it may be helpful to leave a light on while they are sleeping.

It is important that significant people for example teachers, carers and youth leaders involved in the child or young person's life, are aware of the death so that they can provide support where appropriate.



Responding to a child or young person's emotions after a death

It is important to support a child or young person to remember and talk about the person who has died. Children learn about grief from adults, and it is acceptable for you to show an appropriate level of emotion with them.

Children usually find their own unique ways of showing their feelings about the life and death of the person who has died.

Children should be reassured to know that it is okay to be sad, but it is also okay to be happy, have fun and play even when something very sad has happened, such as celebrating birthdays and special occasions. It is not unusual for young children to act out their experience of loss through play activities.

Following the death of someone close, children and young people may have mixed emotions and reflect on times when they felt negatively about the person who has died. This may cause the child to feel guilty, and it is important that they know this can be a normal response to a death. It is helpful to gently remind them that nothing we think or say can cause someone to die. It is important to reassure the child or young person and encourage them to have happy memories.



Children can also display their grief through behavioural changes, for example through aggressive behaviour and this may occur inside or outside the home. Children may blame significant adults for allowing the death to happen and this can be the child or young person's way of expressing anger after a death.

You can help them cope with their anger by acknowledging and validating their emotions. A helpful tip can be to 'Say what you See' for example 'I can see that you are angry. Would you like to talk?'

Helping Children & Young People make memories

Sharing memories of and talking about the person who has died is an important part of the grieving process. Looking at photographs, videos, recordings and mementoes can be comforting for children.

It can be helpful for children to have the opportunity to spend time with some of the belongings of the person who has died. Over time and when you are ready, it may be beneficial for children to choose a sentimental item that they can treasure.



Other ways of remembering can include creating a unique 'memory box', filled with items that remind the child of the person who has died, for example, a picture, letter, card or scent. Creating a scrapbook or making clothing into a cushion or toy can also be a helpful way of making memories.

It is important that a significant adult captures special memories and photographs for a baby or younger child who may have no memories of the person who has died. This can then be shared with them when they are older.

Helpful tips on memory making and how to create mementos can be found on the Bereaved NI website:

<https://bereaved.hscni.net/>

Further support for children and young people

Bereaved NI website: <https://bereaved.hscni.net/>

Support for Children who have been Bereaved:

<https://bereaved.hscni.net/bereavement-support/children-and-young-people/support-for-children-who-have-been-bereaved/>

Support for Young People who have been Bereaved:

<https://bereaved.hscni.net/bereavement-support/children-and-young-people/support-for-teenagers-and-young-adults/>

Cruse Bereavement Support: www.cruse.org.uk/get-support/supporting-children-and-young-people/

Childhood Bereavement Network:

<https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/>

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

Child Bereavement UK:

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

The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network:

<https://www.childhoodbereavement.ie/>



