



# At a time of bereavement

Support and guidance for adults  
caring for grieving children

# Contents

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At a time of bereavement	3-4
Children's understanding of death at different ages	5-7
• Children under 2 years old	5
• Children from 2 to 5 years old	5
• Children of primary school age	6
• Adolescents	7
Involving children and giving them a choice	8-11
• Funerals	8
• Seeing the person's body	9
• Education	10
Moving on	11-12
Further information	13
Frequently asked questions	14-26

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Support and guidance for adults caring for grieving children

**A bereavement affects the whole family and it's important that children receive the special support they need to help them grieve.**

**The way they deal with their loss will have a profound impact on their future development and ability to cope with all sorts of crises. It's therefore vital that adults don't avoid addressing children's grief in the belief that they're protecting them.**

**Family members sometimes interpret a child's silence, lack of questions or apparent indifference as a sign that they're coping well, when often it's really because they're fearful of upsetting others.**

Children have an amazing capacity to deal with the truth and it's important to answer their questions honestly and keep them informed of what's going on around them. They will also need a lot of comfort and reassurance because losing a close family member can make them fearful about their own or other close family members' deaths. If one parent has died they may worry about the other one dying too.

They will experience similar feelings of grief and loss to adults, although they tend to frequently 'dip in and out' of their grief. They need help to understand that emotions such as sadness, anger and fear are normal.



### **Children under 2 years old**

- Long before they are able to talk, babies are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the disappearance of a significant person who responded to their needs on a daily basis.
- Toddlers might show a basic understanding of death when they see a dead bird or insect in the garden but they do not usually understand the implications of this, such as the dead bird cannot feel anything or won't ever get up again.

### **Children from 2 to 5 years old**

- Tend to think very literally, therefore it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion.
- Often struggle with abstract concepts like 'forever' and find it difficult to grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death.

### **Children of primary school age**

- Begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and final. They may be fascinated with the physical aspects of death or the rituals surrounding it.
- May see death as a person who might 'come to get you' or 'catch you' if you are unlucky.
- Begin to develop their imagination and 'magical thinking', which reinforces the belief that their thoughts or actions caused the death and can lead them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.
- Mostly have an awareness of death having a cause and being irreversible but at younger ages do not necessarily see it as inevitable, particularly in relation to themselves.
- As they get older, begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life.
- Can become fearful as a result of their deepening realisation of the possibility of their own future death.

## Adolescents

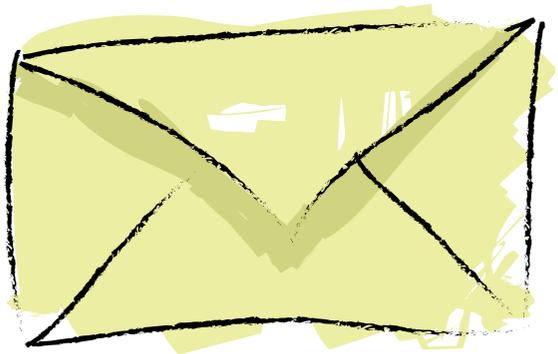
- Grief may be compounded by the struggles of adolescence, finding it hard to ask for support while trying to show the world they are independent.
- Often have their own beliefs and strongly held views and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.
- May talk at length about the death but seldom to those closest to them in the family.
- May cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behaviour.



### **Funerals**

Allow children to be involved in the funeral arrangements, such as choosing flowers, a hymn or song, or writing a poem or letter.

Families are often unsure about the appropriateness of a child attending the funeral but providing the proceedings are explained to the child, there's usually no problem. It's important for the child to have the opportunity to say goodbye and they often regret it later if they don't attend.



## Seeing the person's body

Adults often feel shocked by the idea of a child going to see a dead body and may feel a child will be upset by the experience. As adults are often struggling with their own feelings, it can be a difficult decision to make, especially when the death is sudden.

However, providing the child is given a choice and is well prepared, bereaved children say they do not regret seeing the body. It gives them the chance to say goodbye and be reassured that their loved one is at peace – especially if the death was traumatic. It helps many children understand the reality of death and puts their minds at rest to see it's not as bad as they imagined.



## **Education**

School life can offer a familiar and constant environment, particularly if the child feels that their grief is acknowledged and that they can express their feelings

It's vital to tell the school about the bereavement and explain what the child understands about it and how they seem to be reacting.

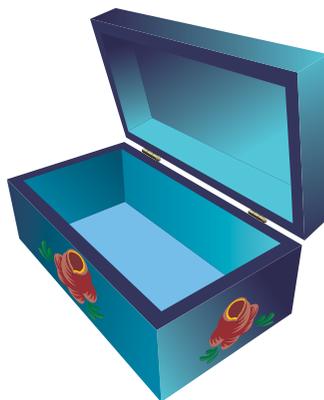
Then discuss a support plan, which should include:

- A named staff member the child can comfortably go to
- Arrangements should the child need “time out” during the school day (they may require a permission card) – identify a quiet, 'safe' place for them to go
- Awareness that grieving can be very tiring and that the child maybe suffering from lack of sleep, loss of appetite etc
- Talking to the child's friends to encourage them to offer support
- Awareness that there may be days when a child is reluctant to attend school
- Awareness that the child may have some difficulty with concentration.

Bereavement never goes away. The pain eases with time but memories can be triggered when least expected.

As children grow and each year passes, memories of the person who has died may dim, so it is important for them to have something to refer to from time to time. This could be in the form of:

- A memory box – they might like to decorate a box for themselves and fill it with reminders of that person, such as photos, a piece of clothing or any other suitable items
- A writing book to record memories, a story or poems
- A photo album/disk full of pictures of times spent together



Anniversaries like birthdays can be painful but sometimes the stress of the day can be eased by the family celebrating the life of that person rather than mourning their death. Let the child suggest what they'd like to do.

This might include:

- Visiting a favourite place to have a picnic
- Sending a message attached to a helium balloon
- Lighting a candle in the person's memory.

**Always remember...** we can't prevent children from experiencing sadness but your help can mean that children are supported, rather than being alone.

Children do survive the trauma of loss and discover that life will continue and can be fun. But we do need to be there for them to achieve this.



**We have further information sheets on our website including the following:-**

- Ways to remember your important person
- Books list for children
- How to create a memory box and other memory activities

**For further information about child bereavement, you may wish to visit some national websites:**

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

[www.childbereavementuk.org.uk](http://www.childbereavementuk.org.uk)

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

# Frequently asked questions

### **Is it ok to cry?**

It's completely normal to feel sad and cry when someone has died. Sometimes children won't cry in front of mum or dad because they're trying to protect them.

Adults often hide tears from children too. If a child sees an adult crying it can make it feel normal and acceptable for them to do the same.

Letting the tears out can make you feel a bit better. Sometimes it can be helpful for adults and children to cry together then have a hug.

**Is there anything I should or shouldn't say?**

Although it's natural to want to protect children, sometimes the language we use can add to confusion surrounding the death. Terms such as "they've gone to sleep" may leave children fearful of going to sleep and never waking up. By saying "they've gone on a journey", a child may expect the person to come back, or be scared of going on holiday.

Children benefit much more by hearing things such as "died", "their body stopped working" and "when someone has died they can never come back". This may seem insensitive but will give them greater understanding of the situation and make them better equipped to cope with it.

### **Is it ok to talk about suicide?**

Children and young people have a right to know how their significant person died. It can be incredibly difficult to explain and Nelson's Journey can support parents/carers in this. There's a book available to assist adults with this called 'beyond the rough rock' which can be downloaded at [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk).

There's no right time to tell a child about someone taking their own life but the longer it's left unsaid, the harder it becomes.

Sensitive information is always better delivered by someone the child trusts, rather than hearing it in the playground or seeing it in the newspaper.

It's important to be aware that if this information is withheld from a child, they may become resentful towards the adult who didn't tell them and lose the trust they had.

**Is it ok to talk about the person who died?**

Talking about the person who has died can help families remember things about them.

Some families find this difficult, especially shortly after the death. But even though no one says their name, everyone could still be thinking about them. This is often referred to as 'the elephant in the room'. Talking about the person and the way you feel about their death can help children to cope – keeping things bottled up can make both children and adults feel worse.

**Is it ok to still have fun?**

It is normal to still find things funny and enjoyable even when someone you love has died.

Sometimes people wrongly think that this means you don't miss the person, or that it's disrespectful, but even though someone has died it's still OK to have fun.

Children (particularly when very young) can be sad one minute and happy the next – this is completely normal.

### **Should children see the person's body after they've died?**

As adults, we naturally try to protect children from experiences that will hurt them but sometimes children's imaginations can be worse than reality.

Going to see a loved one's body can be very difficult for all the family. Sometimes, however, it can give children clarity and understanding of what's happened and help them to accept that the person is dead and cannot come back.

Some children may be shocked or scared by seeing the person's body. This is a decision that needs to be made by families, taking the child's wishes into account. If they're not given the opportunity, they may feel resentful in years to come.

If a child wishes to see the body, they can be prepared by being shown pictures of the room or visiting the empty room before seeing the body. You can ask your Funeral Director for guidance.

**What do I tell the children about burial, cremation etc?**

Using factual information can be the best way to explain this difficult subject.

Children often find it hard to understand how a person can be buried or cremated and also be a star or in heaven. It's important to explain to children that when you have died and your body has stopped working, you can no longer feel anything.

Different people believe different things about what happens after someone dies – everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, including children.

It's important to make children aware that people have different beliefs and nobody knows for sure. To allow a child to grasp the concept of heaven, you may need to use terms such as 'spirit' and 'soul' and say that it's the spirit that goes to heaven. You can say that the person is put in a special box called a coffin which, at the end of the funeral, is either buried (put in the ground), or put in a very hot oven where the coffin and body are burned (cremated), turning them to ash.

It may seem difficult to explain cremation to children but emphasise that the person can no longer feel pain to make it less daunting.

If we don't give children enough information, they may assume that a burial or cremation is something else entirely and often think something much worse.

### **Can children go to the funeral?**

It's a good idea to ask a child if they want to go to the funeral. If they don't know what a funeral is, describe it and help them prepare for what to expect.

Even young children may benefit from attending a funeral, as it can be a special chance to say goodbye.

Funerals can be a difficult day for all the family. If a parent/carer feels they'll find it too hard to look after the children, they can ask a family member or friend to be there during the ceremony, who can leave the service with them if it gets too much.

Involve children in planning the funeral by asking what flowers they'd like, writing a letter to go in the coffin, or choosing a song to be played that was special to them.

Funerals can be confusing as sometimes they're sad and sombre and can also be a celebration of life. Prepare children for what to expect.

### **Should I make my child go to the grave?**

There are many different ways of grieving. Some people find it helps to visit the grave or site where the ashes are scattered, others find this very difficult.

If you do not have a grave to visit then it may be useful for children to have a special place to go instead to remember their loved one.

Children need to feel in control of their grief and to be given choices and opportunities to grieve in their own way.

If a child refuses to visit the grave, speak to them about why they feel this way and what they think it will be like. It may be that a child wants to go to but not with the whole family, or to do it on their own.

By giving the child options of how and who to visit with, they may benefit from the experience.

If a child vehemently refuses to go, that is their choice and needs to be respected and supported.

**Should we tell school what has happened?**

It's a good idea to inform school of the death.

Children and young people can be asked how they want to be treated at school – if they want a 'time out card' should they feel overwhelmed in lessons for example.

School needs to know the reasons a child is absent and should be sensitive to the situation a child is in.

It's also a good idea to remind schools about anniversaries such as the person's birthday or the date of the death so they're aware that children may find these days particularly difficult.

It might be a good idea for the child to have a staff member they trust at the school that they can go to if they are struggling or having a bad day.

### **Will my child's behaviour change?**

When someone dies, children and adults experience a range of different emotions and feelings.

Expect a child's behaviour to change following a bereavement as they come to terms with their loss.

Anger is a normal feeling for children and young people to experience and they need to be encouraged to express this in a safe way. Some may start behaving as if they're younger than their years.

It's also common for children to feel unwell or even replicate symptoms the person who died had, such as a headache if the person had a brain injury. Children can experience a lack of concentration, especially in school. It's important to acknowledge how the child is feeling.

**How long after the death do you get over it?**

When someone you love dies, there is no getting over it.

However, as time passes, you start to feel better and adapt to life without them.

There's no set time in which you should feel better; it could be months, years or longer before things change.

Life will never be how it was before the person died but you'll feel improvements over time and find a new 'normal'.

If someone says: "It's been ages, you should be over it by now," they may not have experienced bereavement themselves.

Everyone's grief journey is individual and there's no right or wrong way to grieve, just take things a day at a time.

People can be affected by a death many years down the line, and they might initially suppress feelings that reoccur in years to come.



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