

Supporting your child through a loss or bereavement: Information for parents

Barnsley Educational Child and
Community Psychology Service

Bereavement Information for Parents

The information below is to help parents and carers that are supporting children and young people who have experienced a recent bereavement and provides information relating to questions and conversations you may have with children.

Information has been taken from a variety of sources, which are listed at the end of this document.

A child's understanding of death:

The age and stage of a child will impact how they understand death and process when someone they know has died. Adults can then support children through this experience and provide information in an age-appropriate way.

Child's Age:	Understanding:
2-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children at this age think very literally with language such as 'gone to sleep' or 'we've lost them'.• They do not understand that death cannot be reversed and need to be repeatedly told the person who has died cannot come back.• Children may believe their actions have caused the death somehow.• Children will often act out events in their play to help their understanding of what is happening around them.
5-8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Usually understand death happens to everyone and is irreversible.• Often ask lots of questions about death.• May display behaviours they have previously displayed as a younger child, as well as changes in their sleep patterns or having nightmares. Children will also express their emotions through their behaviour.
8-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children understand death is universal, irreversible and has a cause.• Can find it hard to express their emotions and may be shown through physical aches / pains or through their behaviour.• May be curious about the physical aspects of death.
13-18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding of death is similar to that of adults.• Can verbalise feelings, but may not want to.• Can think about the meaning of life/ death.• May want to be the same as peers and may reject offers of support.

After a bereavement:

All children and young people are different in how they may respond to a bereavement. Some may not show any reaction, whereas others may show some changes in their feelings and behaviours. These may include:

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear, upset and worry
- Anger
- Withdrawal
- Vague complaints of illness and pain
- Exhaustion and tiredness
- Changed patterns of sleeping and or eating

It is important to note these changes are a normal part of grief and are usually temporary. However, parents should seek further support if these changes are prolonged over a longer period of time.

Both children and adults experience grief and both feel similar emotions when they lose someone they were close to. However, children may not be able to express their emotions in the same way as adults. Adults are likely to sit with their grief for longer periods of time than children; this can be thought of like wading through a huge river.

Children experience the same intensity of grief but can come in and out of this quickly like jumping in and out of a puddle. They may cry for a short period of time and then be happily playing with their peers. This can surprise adults, but it is normal. It is important children are given the time, space and support they need to manage this.

Conversations about death:

When chatting with your child about a bereavement, make use of language that is clear and simple for the child's age and level of understanding. Phrases such as 'gone to sleep' or 'we've lost someone' in relation to death can be confusing for children. Who then may not feel able to go to sleep on a night if they associate this with dying or may try to find the 'lost' person. Clear words such as 'dead' or 'died' might feel blunt, but are much easier for children to understand.

Children learn from the adults around them, so if you become upset when talking about death, it is helpful to acknowledge your feelings, whilst reassuring the child that you will feel okay in a moment. This will help children to know it is okay and normal to express their own feelings.

Below is a suggestion for what you could say when explaining the concept of death to a young child. Exactly what you say will depend on individual circumstances and your own beliefs. A good approach is honesty combined with lots of reassurance. Concentrate on what feels right for you and the child you are with. This is an example of a clear way to explain death to a child:

When somebody dies their body stops working and they can't be brought back to life. A dead body does not breathe because their lungs are no longer working and the heart has stopped. A dead body cannot move, it will be quiet and still. A dead body cannot feel anything so there will be no pain.

Here is a link to a helpful video that also explains the concept of 'death' to children:

Winston's Wish, What is death? What is grief?:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXFGT0XVKKw>

Questions a child may have:

It is likely the child will have questions relating to death as they try to understand the situation. This will often be a few days or weeks after hearing the news. Reassure the child it is okay to ask questions and that you will do your best to answer them. Don't feel pressured to provide an answer straight away, it's okay to say you're not sure and need to come back to them with an answer. It is also okay to say you don't know, some questions remain unanswered after a death.

Try to only answer the question the child may have asked and avoid giving extra details and information.

If faced with a question you find difficult or are not sure how to answer, it can be helpful to ask the child what they think. This will give you an indication of what is behind their question and how much the child already knows and understands.

Children may repeatedly ask the same questions and you may have to repeat information to them, as they continue to try and make sense of what has happened. Answer questions honestly, but keep explanations short, clear and appropriate for their age and understanding.

Below are some possible questions that children may ask, with some guidance on how best to respond to these. These examples are directly taken from 'Explaining death and dying to children', produced by Child Bereavement UK: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/explaining-death-and-dying-to-children>

Will I die? Will you die? Why do people die? When will I die?

To answer these questions, it can help to explain that all living things die, that this is part of the cycle of life. As living things, people will also die. You can reassure them that most people are very old when they die. It may help to remind them of all the people they have in their lives and to think about all the things they wish to achieve in their lives, places they might like to visit, jobs they might want to do, their hopes and dreams.

What happens when you die? Where do you go to when you die?

It can help to start with a simple biological explanation of death; the heart stops beating, the person stops breathing and their brain stops working. Younger children might like to feel their breath going in and out and their heart beating to help with their understanding. It can also be helpful to refer to the body as being a bit like an empty shell. Some young people want to know what happens to the body, for example between death and a funeral. This might naturally lead to a discussion about beliefs, ceremonies or rituals.

You might say, "Some people believe... and others think ...", or that you are not sure what happens when someone dies. It can be a good opportunity to ask them what they think and have a discussion with them.

Can we stop people from dying?

It is important to remind them that people die because we are living things, just like plants and animals. For younger children, it might help to talk about most people being old and their bodies being worn out, but younger people may die if they have an illness or serious injuries which cannot be cured.

For older children, it can be helpful to discuss how we cannot change the fact that someone has died but we might consider what we can learn about improving treatments or safety guidance to help others in the future.

Encourage young people to consider what sort of things help them to live healthy lives – such as eating well, keeping safe and looking after themselves and others. Explain that medicines and treatments for illnesses and accidents are always being improved and people today live longer and healthier lives than they did in the past.

Additional information relating to answering a child's questions about bereavement can be found through the following video: <https://winstonswish.org/how-to-answer-difficult-questions-about-a-bereavement/>

What can I do to help?

Things a parent or carer can do for a child who has recently experienced a bereavement include:

- Being there, listening to your child and showing you are trying to understand how they are feeling.
- Making sure they know you are there for them, where they can talk about what has happened, if they want to. Some children may prefer and find it easier to talk about what has happened whilst playing and drawing with a trusted adult.
- Give clear, honest and age-appropriate information
- Giving them time to ask questions and answering these clearly and honestly
- Reassurance that it is okay to experience different feelings
- Keeping to normal family routines as much as possible
- Being patient if you have to go over the same topic or answer the same questions from the child multiple times.

Ideas for children:

A creative activity is a helpful way to support a bereaved child to talk about their feelings, and find ways to remember someone special to them who has died.

Here are some ideas for things you may wish to do with your child:

- Talk to the child or young person about happy memories they have of the individual who has died.
- **Memory Jar:** These happy memories, as well as things you like and admire about the individual can be written on post its or small pieces of paper and included in a jar. The jar can be opened and child can pull out a note and read the happy memory.
- **Drawing and Images:** Look together at photographs or videos that include the individual who has died. Children may like to draw pictures of their memories with the individual. Such drawings, as well as written memories can be included within a scrapbook.

- **Letter and Poems:** Children may wish to write poems and letters to or about the person who has died.
- **Beaded Bracelet:** Select beads to create a bracelet to remind you of the person who has died. This might be different beads that remind you of particular memories with that person.
- **Fizzy Feelings:** Use a bottle of fizzy drink to show children and young people how feelings can build up over time until they explode and why it's better to let out your feelings a little bit at a time rather than keep them bottled up.
- **Worry Dolls:** These can help children to talk about their worries and fears, especially at bedtime. Children tell the worry dolls their fear and the dolls hold them so the child can do something else and not think about it for a while. The child may wish to create their own worry doll using pipe cleaners, or perhaps a worry monster from a cardboard box.
- **Stories:** It can be helpful to read a story together with a child to help them understand their sad and confusing emotions. Such stories should be read together with the child, such as 'The Invisible String' by Patrice Karst, where the story covers being separated from those we love and how this love is the unending connection that binds us all. This story is read aloud on YouTube, through the following link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rZNTFf35Aw>

Supporting yourself:

You are doing your best supporting your children or young person, and that is all they need. However, it is important to remember these are difficult conversations, and it is important to take care of yourself, so you can continue to support your child during this time. This may include:

- Staying emotionally connected with others using messages, phone calls and social media.
- Try to keep to routines within the home, such as mealtimes, getting up time and getting washed and dressed as well as bedtime.
- Try to get outside for some fresh air
- Understand that your children and young people dip in and out of their emotions quickly. They will set their own pace
- Allow children to connect with other family, cousins as well as friends
- Limit the amount of news and social media you consume while feeling sad as it can increase feelings of distress
- Be tolerant and kind to yourself

Helpful resources for further information:

Child Bereavement UK: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/> / or call **0800 02 888 40**

Winston's Wish: <https://winstonswish.org/> / or call **08088 020 021**

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/get-support/i-am-a-parent/>

[Books and resources | Child Bereavement UK](#)

<https://winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-parents/>

References used to produce this document:

[How to talk to your child about grief | Barnardo's \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/explaining-to-a-child-that-someone-has-died>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/explaining-death-and-dying-to-children>

<https://winstonswish.org/do-children-understand-death/>

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

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/activities-for-grieving-children-and-young-people>

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