



Supporting Children and Young People with Bereavement

Guidance for Parents and Carers

Flintshire
Educational Psychology Service

Children's Understanding of Death

The nature of a child's understanding of death and bereavement will be different at different stages of development. Although a child's grief is individual, their understanding of the loss of a loved one progresses as they mature.

Do bear in mind that a child's understanding of death during their development will differ in circumstances where the child may be experiencing educational difficulties.

Birth to six months

Babies do not cognitively understand the notion of death. However, that does not mean to say that they do not respond to the loss of someone close, or that they don't experience grief. A baby up to six months old experiences feelings of separation and abandonment as part of their bereavement. The bereaved baby is aware that the person is missing, or not there and this can cause the baby to become anxious and fretful. This can be heightened if it is the baby's primary caregiver who has died and the baby is able to identify that the one who is now feeding them, changing them and cuddling them is not the deceased person. Similarly, if it is the baby's mother who is grieving a loss, the baby can pick up on these feelings and experience grief too.

Six months to two years

At this developmental stage, the baby is able to picture his/her mother or primary caregiver internally if s/he is not present. If it is the primary caregiver who has died, the baby will protest at their absence by loud crying and angry tears. It is common for babies to become withdrawn and lose interest in their toys and feeding and they will likely lose interest interacting with others. At the more mature end of this developmental stage, bereaved toddlers can be observed actively seeking the deceased person. For instance, if granddad spent much of his time prior to death in his shed, the toddler might persistently return to investigate the shed in the hope that they will find him there.

Two years to five years

During their development between the age of two to five years, children do not understand that death is irreversible. For instance, a four year old child may be concerned that although nanny was dead she should have come home by now. This example illustrates how children at this stage do not understand the finality of death and nor do they understand what the term "dead" actually means. It is common for a young child to be told that their aunt has died and still expect to see them alive and well in the immediate future. Children do not understand that life functions have been terminated and will ask questions such as:

“Won’t Uncle Bob be lonely in the ground by himself?”

“Do you think we should put some sandwiches in Grandpa’s coffin in case he gets hungry?”

“What if Nan can’t breathe under all that earth?”

“Will Daddy be hurt if they burn him?”

As the cognitive understanding of children in this age range is limited, they can sometimes demonstrate less of a reaction to the news of the death than might be observed by an older child and might promptly go out to play on hearing the news of the death.

Children aged between two and five years old have difficulty with the abstract concepts surrounding death. For instance, they might be confused as to how one person can be in a grave and also be in heaven at the same time. They will become further confused if they are told that the deceased person is simply sleeping and this in turn could make them fearful of falling asleep or seeing anyone else asleep. They might insist on waiting for the person who has died to wake up or similarly if they have been told that the person who has died has gone on a long journey they may await their return.

At this age, bereaved children can become involved in omnipotence or magical thinking. This refers to the concept that bereaved children believe that their actions, inaction, words, behaviours or thoughts are directly responsible for their loved one’s death. This form of thinking is not exclusive to this particular age group and can be experienced by many bereaved children and young people of older ages.

It is essential that you explain to the bereaved child that the death was not in any way their fault or responsibility. The need to reassure the grieving child that nothing they said / did not say, did or did not do caused the death is paramount.

Five years to ten years

Children at this developmental stage have acquired a wider understanding of death and what it entails. They begin to realise that death is the end of a person’s life, that the person who has died will not return and that life functions have been terminated. By the age of seven years, the average child accepts that death is an inevitability and that all people including themselves will eventually die.

This understanding can also increase a child’s anxieties regarding the imminent deaths of other people to whom they are close. Children of this age, are broadening their social networks in school and are therefore open to receive both information and misinformation from their peers and social circles.

With this in mind, it is important that the cause of death, the funeral, and burial process, and what happens to the deceased person's body, are explained in a factual and age appropriate manner to the bereaved child. Children will ask many questions and may want to know intricate details pertaining to the death and decomposition of the body. Again, it is vital that children have such details explained to them clearly, so that they understand.

At this developmental stage, children can empathise with and show compassion for peers who have been bereaved. Children aged between five and ten years, often copy the coping mechanisms they observe in bereaved adults, and they may try to disguise their emotions in an attempt to protect the bereaved adult. The bereaved child can sometimes feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings.

The important thing is to let them do this. Avoid remarks such as, "Come on, be a big brave girl for mummy" or "Big boys don't cry", such comments, however well meant, can make children feel they need to hide their feelings or that what they are feeling is wrong. This can cause complications as the bereaved child develops.

Teenagers' Understanding of Death

Young people or teenagers have developed a greater understanding of death, the long-term implications of losing someone close, and are more keenly aware of the emotional aspects than their younger counterparts are.

Due to the developmental changes taking place within the young person at this time their reactions to death are likely to be extremely intense. Many young people will reflect on the injustice of the death asking why the person who has died had to die and they will be considering in greater depth the notion of fate.

The bereaved young person is likely to become concerned about who will pay the bills or care for them if the person who has died was their primary caregiver. The bereaved young person is likely to have a wider social network that they are more likely to seek support from than their immediate family as they struggle to create an identity independent from that of their family.

The young person's tasks of grieving are very similar to that of an adult, but the young mourner is often unable to manage the strong emotions that bereavement entails and can therefore present as being extremely angry and even end up in physical fights. Some bereaved young people can revert to childish behaviour in order to relocate some security and normality in their lives where as others might try to "grow up too fast" and see themselves as taking on adult roles.

It is essential to remember that young people are not adults and therefore they should not be burdened with adult roles. Like all children and young people, bereaved teenagers need to be allowed and encouraged to share how they are feeling and what frightens them.

There can be a tendency for young people to try to avert their emotions or bottle them up by avoiding the family or by assuming the role of an adult. If this happens, gentle encouragement is needed for the young person to open up and communicate their feelings. Sometimes a bereaved young person may become involved in risky behaviours in an attempt to manage their grief and its associated emotions.

For example, some bereaved young people may use alcohol or drugs as a way of self-soothing. Often the alcohol / drugs act as an anaesthetic to the pain they are experiencing. Self-harming can also be employed by bereaved young people in an attempt to help them cope with their sadness. If the bereaved young person is self-medicating or harming themselves help should be sought.

Key points to remember

- A bereaved young person may appear to be grieving like an adult but they are not an adult and should be treated as a young person.
- The bereaved young person should not be burdened with tasks that a responsible adult can undertake.
- Grieving young people may prefer to speak with their friends or people outside of the immediate family about the death. This should be encouraged.
- Due to the developmental changes that a young person will be undergoing, the emotions related to the death of someone close may be very intense.
- The young person needs to be encouraged to express how they are feeling and the emotions they are encountering.
- Regressive behaviour may occur within the bereaved young person.
- If a young person is self-medicating or self-harming as a response to their grief, professional advice should be sought.

How Do I Tell my Child Someone has died?

(Child Bereavement UK)

Talking to a young child about death and dying is incredibly difficult and can feel just too hard to do. This is compounded by an adult's natural instinct to protect children from the tough things in life. In order to make some sense of what has happened, children need information and explanations. These need to be honest, simple, and in language the child understands.

With support, children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or traumatic; what they find hard are the untruths. When circumstances surrounding the death are particularly distressing, it may be tempting to withhold information, but even in those instances, the same principles apply. The following are suggestions to help you with what to say, how much to say, when and how to say it. The words suggested are not meant to be a script. They are ideas to give you the confidence to go with what feels right for you and the child or children you are with.

When is it best to tell them that someone has died and where should it be done?

- It may go against adults' protective instincts, but children need to hear the news as soon as possible. The longer you leave it, the greater the likelihood that they will overhear a conversation or find out in some other inappropriate way. Children are very sensitive to atmosphere and will already know that something serious has happened, but be unsure as to exactly what.
- The news is best heard from a member of the family, but this can be a very hard thing to do. If you feel unable to do this, try to stay in close proximity while someone else familiar to the child explains what has happened.
- If you are breaking the news yourself, have someone else around to support you.
- If possible, find somewhere where you will not be disturbed.
- Try to be physically close to the child or have some sort of physical contact such as holding a hand. Sitting on a settee is ideal. For a child who finds physical contact uncomfortable, just sit nearby.

When talking to a child of any age, the following principles apply, regardless of the circumstances:

Use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is important to use the real words such as 'dead' and 'died'. Euphemisms including 'lost' or 'gone to sleep' may seem kinder, but for a child can cause confusion.

Only give as much information as a child wants. This is usually indicated by them asking a question. If they have asked the question it usually means that they are ready to hear, or need to hear, the answer.

Try to answer only the question asked and avoid giving extra detail. There is a fine line between being honest and overloading a child with information they do not want. Information can always be added later if needed.

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 how much the child already knows and understands.

Explaining to young children that someone has died

Alert the child to the fact that you have something sad to say: 'I have some very sad news to tell you...'

Often initially all you need to say is that the person has died; more questions will follow when the child is ready for further explanation and information.

If a person has been unwell, it can be helpful to build on what the child already knows: 'You know last time we saw granny and she was very unwell...'

Reassure the child that it is okay to ask questions about anything at all and you will do your best to answer them honestly.

Explaining what dead means to young children

The following are suggestions for words you could use when explaining to a young child the concept of being dead. Exactly what you choose to 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 children that you are with.

'When somebody dies their body stops working. 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 very quiet and still. A dead body cannot feel anything so there will be no pain.'

Because a young child can find it hard to grasp the difference between being dead and being alive, they may need to be reassured with words along the lines of the following:

‘Because their body has stopped working, dead people do not need anything to eat or to drink and they cannot feel the cold. Dead people stay dead for ever; much as we might like them to, they cannot come back to life’.

Suggestions for books that might help you talk to a young child

Someone I know Has Died by Trish Phillips

Never Too Young to Grieve: Supporting Children Under 5 After the Death of a Parent
(Available from Winston’s Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Talking about Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child by Earl Grollman

Someone Very Important Has Just Died by Mary Turner

Helping Children and Young People with Bereavement
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General Reading Materials

Books for Children and Adults to Read Together

The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back. Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong

Someone Has Died Suddenly. Mary Williams (www.suddendeath.org)

The Secret C: Straight Talking About Cancer. Julie A. Stokes, OBE.

([Www.Winston's wish.org.uk](http://www.Winston's_wish.org.uk))

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine (Activity book) Diana Crossley

Books for Younger Children (Nursery and KS1)

Goodbye Mousie. Robie H. Harris

When Uncle Bob Died. Althea

Dear Grandma Bunny. Dick Bruna

Badger’s Parting Gifts. Susan Varley

Always and Forever. Debi Giliori and Alan Durant

Are You Sad, Little Bear? A Book About Learning to Say Goodbye. Rachel Rivett

Books for KS1 and KS2

Flamingo Dream. Donna Jo Napoli

Fred. Posy Simmonds

Granpa. John Burningham

Why Mum? Catherine Thornton

When Dinosaurs Die: Our Guide to Understanding Death. Laurie Krasny

Saying Goodbye to Daddy. Judith Vigna

Books for KS2 and KS3

The Cat Mummy. Jacqueline Wilson

Sad Book Michael Rosen

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? Trevor Romain

Ways to Live Forever. Sally Nicholls

Books for KS3 and KS4

Double Act. Jacqueline Wilson

Dustbin Baby. Jacqueline Wilson

The Charlie Barber Treatment. Carole Lloyd

The Lost Boys' Appreciation Society. Alan Gibbons

The Spying Game. Pat moon

Reference:

Helping Children who yearn for someone they love. Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong

Helping Children with Loss: A Guidebook. Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong

How Can I Help a Grieving Child?

Accepting the Child's Experience

Children and young people need to be given the opportunity to grieve as any adult would. Trying to ignore or avert the child's grief is not protective, in fact, it can prove to be extremely damaging as the child enters adulthood. Children and young people regardless of their age need to be encouraged to talk about how they are feeling and supported to understand their emotions.

It is also important to remember that children and young people grieve in different ways. Grief is unique and therefore it is not wise to assume that all children and young people will experience the same emotions, enact the same behaviour or respond similarly to other grieving children and young people. A child or young person's grief differs from that of an adult's grief because it alters as they develop.

Time to grieve

Children and young people often revisit the death and review their emotions and feelings about their bereavement as they move through their stages of development. Children and young people do not have the emotional capacity to focus on their grief for long periods of time, and it is not uncommon for grieving children and young people to become distracted by play. This protective mechanism allows the child or young person to be temporarily diverted from the bereavement.

Bereaved children and young people need time to grieve and in order for them to address the bereavement. They need to be given the facts regarding the death in language appropriate to their age or level of comprehension. Avoid using metaphors for death such as, "Daddy has gone to sleep", this will make the child or young person believe that Daddy will come back to them and may constantly ask when he is going to wake up. Similarly, the child or young person might encounter problems with bedtime and not wanting to sleep for fear of not waking up.

Talking to children

It is understandable that many caregivers are reluctant to talk to the child or young person about the death, as they do not want to cause distress or fear. Children and young people who are bereaved need to know that their loved one has died, how they died, and where they are now. Failure to be honest with the grieving child or young person means that their grief is not being acknowledged and this can cause problems later on.

If the bereaved child or young person wants to ask questions about death and what dying means, answer them truthfully and if you do not know the answer to a specific question don't be tempted to make the answer up. Assure the child or young person that although you do not know the answer to their question you will find out for them.

Children and Young People's Emotional Responses to a Death

Children and young people, like adults, may react in a number of ways to the death of someone close. They may experience shock, denial, anger, bargaining, guilt, depression, and acceptance. They are also likely to experience a range of physical responses.

Shock

For many young people and children shock is the first response when learning that someone close has died. The way in which shock is demonstrated varies and may not be communicated in the same way as bereaved peers or siblings.

Some children or young people might laugh upon being told of the death. This response should not be viewed as disrespectful or inappropriate because it is a reflex reaction over which the child or young person has no conscious control. Laughter originating from shock is indicative that the child or young person's brain is momentarily protecting them from the reality of the death.

It is not uncommon to hear a child or young person in this situation ask the person breaking the bad news to them if they are joking. On an intellectual level, the child or young person knows that what is being told them is not a joke but on an emotional level the ability to process this fact is extremely difficult. The laughter will cease when the rational mind has processed that the person has died.

Some children and young people might immediately start tidying up, putting away toys, returning to homework, or clearing away plates, and so on. This action can appear quite robotic as if the child or young person has switched on to autopilot. The commencing of mundane tasks such as tidying things away is indicative of the child or young person struggling to process the information and trying to "carry on as normal" in the hope that the news just given to them might not be true.

Shock, like grief, is an individual response and can manifest in many ways. Some children and young people might express a difficulty in verbally acknowledging what has just been said, others might start to sob uncontrollably, others might laugh and some might start putting things away and clearing up. Shock is a protective state, it allows the individual time to process bad news in the manner that best suits them and acts as a temporary buffer before reality sinks in.

Try not to be alarmed if the child or young person's response seems inappropriate, shock, as manifests itself in different ways.

How Can I Help?

- Try not to appear visibly alarmed if a child or young person's response seems inappropriate to you. Remember shock can manifest in many different ways.
- Reassure the child or young person that any feelings of numbness and disbelief that they are experiencing and the inability to accept that someone close has died is normal.
- When explaining to a child or young person that someone has died try to keep your language clear and simple. Tell them the truth in a way that they can understand and is appropriate to their level of comprehension.
- Reassure the child or young person that you are there for them and that you will listen to them and answer their questions.

Denial

Denial may be a common response to a death. It manifests so that the child or young person does not have to accept or believe that their loved one has died. Denial as a response to bereavement can be witnessed when a child or young person does not want to leave a certain place like home or a hospital ward for fear of leaving the person who has died behind.

A child might be heard saying that they do not want to stay at nanny's house in case mummy comes home. Other children and young people who have been bereaved might adopt certain behaviours such as obsessively tidying their room or furiously brushing their teeth to impress the deceased person when they return.

Searching can be another form which denial can take. For example, some bereaved children and young people might actively search for the deceased person as part of their belief that the person is not really dead. Searching varies depending on the age of the child or young person who has been bereaved. Therefore, a child might be seen looking under beds and emptying toy boxes to check if the deceased person is not hiding there. Older children and young people might search local areas or places of work where the deceased frequented in a similar desire to find the person alive and well.

Denial can also be demonstrated by bereaved children and young people who do not want to attend school or go to bed, for fear of missing the person who has died returning.

Denial as a response to bereavement is useful to the child or young person as it gives them time to pursue quests to relocate the person who has died and puts off the inevitability of accepting that their loved one will not be coming back.

How can I help?

- Acknowledge that bereaved children and young people will need time to process the death of someone close and that they may not appear to accept that the person has died.
- Talk openly to the child or young person. Let them know that they can talk about what has happened and they will not get in trouble for asking questions relating to the death.
- If your child or young person appears to be searching for the person who has died, gently explain to them, in language appropriate to their age and level of understanding that the person will not be coming back.
- Respect the child or young person's denial is a protective mechanism and should dissolve in time.

Anger

Anger as a response to bereavement is common amongst children and adults alike. However, unlike adults, bereaved children and young people, depending on their age and level of comprehension, can find it difficult to understand their emotions and articulate how they are feeling.

This inability to communicate their grief can prove highly frustrating to children and young people and this in turn can lead to anger. Children and young people can feel anger towards themselves for something they perceived that they did or did not do which they believe contributed to the death of their loved one.

They can also feel angry with people they feel did not do enough to prevent their loved one from dying. A child might be extremely angry towards the nurses who cared for his mother whilst she was dying believing that their care was inadequate or lacking in some way and that was why his mother died.

Quite common is the anger a child or young person feels towards the person who has died. This anger can be directed at the person who has died for not allowing the child or young person the time to say goodbye, it could be because the child or young person feels that they have been abandoned by the person. Anger can also be directed at the person who has died because their death has left the child or young person to deal with the strong emotions by themselves.

Anger can manifest itself in various ways according to the child or young person's understanding of death at the time of the bereavement. Younger children may have tantrums and become aggressive towards others; older children might become disruptive at school and get in to fights with other children.

A bereaved teenager might engage in risk-taking behaviours and turn to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to placate the rage they feel or they might become involved in offending behaviours.

Anger is an understandable response to bereavement and it is something that the majority of children and young people will encounter as they grieve.

How can I help?

- If a child or young person's anger is causing them to hurt themselves or others explain to them that it is okay to feel angry but not okay to hurt themselves or other people.
- Encourage the child or young person to vent their anger towards a pillow or to go for a run. Anything that will allow the child or young person to channel their anger in a safe way can be used.
- Reassure the child or young person that it is okay to feel anger towards the person who has died and that this is a natural response and not something they should feel guilty about.
- If the child or young person's anger is directed towards you, try not to take it personally. Often children and young people will direct their anger at the person to whom they feel closest. By remaining constant and not getting upset by the child or young person's anger, you are reinforcing the fact that you will be there for them no matter what.

Bargaining

This particular response to bereavement is not peculiar to children and young people, bereaved adults too often plead for the return of their deceased loved one in exchange for a promise to act a certain way, abstain from certain behaviours, and so on.

As the nature of grief is individual, not all children and young people will experience the act of bargaining as a response to bereavement. Those children and young people that do will often beseech a deity or something that the child or young person sees as having the power to restore their loved one back to life.

Like some of their adult counterparts, the grieving child or young person will plead for the deity / higher power to give life to the deceased person in exchange for a pledge or behaviour that the child or young person believes will please them. For example, a child might be heard to bargain with God, "Please God, if you bring my sister back I promise I'll be good for mummy and daddy".

Bargaining is the child or young person's desire to turn back the clock to the time when the deceased person was still alive. Bargaining can serve as a tool for distraction, distracting the young person or child from the pain of reality. The nature

of bargaining can alter over time. For instance, the bereaved child or young person may begin by bargaining for the return of their loved one and then later this plea changes and the child bargains their life for the return of the person who has died to take their place.

Bargaining can offer the child or young person temporary respite from the pain of grieving.

How can I help?

- Gently explain to the child or young person that there is nothing that anyone can say or do that will bring the person who has died back.
- Provide the child or young person with the reassurance that they do not need to try to be perfect in order to bring the person who has died back.
- Understand that in spite of your reassurance some children and young people will continue to bargain as it can help them feel that they are being proactive in trying to bring the person who has died back.
- Remember that bargaining behaviour should disappear as the child or young person moves towards accepting the finality of death.

Guilt

Guilt can be seen as anger turned inwards towards the self. Bereaved children and young people are particularly vulnerable to feeling guilty for the death of someone close. Children and young people can become convinced that the death was their fault due to something they did or said or something they did not do.

Feelings of guilt in response to bereavement can be heightened if the child or young person felt some sort of momentary animosity towards the deceased person whilst they were alive. Guilt can also follow instances where the child or young person has felt momentary relief during their grieving. If a child or young person is allowed to stay up and watch television for an hour more than they would have been when the deceased person was alive, they can feel guilty for enjoying this lapse in rules. Children and young people can also feel guilty if they forget to think of the deceased person even for as little as five minutes.

It is vital that bereaved children and young people are reassured that they are in no way guilty of the death and that nothing they said / did not say, did / did not do would have prevented the death from occurring. Younger children can sometimes feel guilty that someone close to them died because they misbehaved on the way home from school or because they lied to a teacher. Never underestimate a bereaved child or young person's perception of how they might feel responsible through personal inaction or cross words, for the death of their loved one.

When reassuring a grieving child or young person that they are not to blame remember to explain why and how they are not responsible. If the child or young person showers you with their reasons as to why they feel responsible, listen patiently and answer truthfully each question providing age appropriate examples of how they had no part in the death.

How can I help?

- Reassure the child or young person that they are not to blame for the death of someone close.
- Explore with your bereaved child or young person how and why they feel they are responsible for the death. In turn, explain how and why they are not responsible.
- Remember that not all bereaved children and young people who are experiencing guilt relating to the death of someone close will tell you that they are. However, increased anxiety and worry can often be indicative of guilt so try to be watchful for this. If the child or young person has not mentioned that they feel guilty for the death, when you are talking with them remember to include reassurance that the death is not their fault for any reason.
- Encourage the child or young person to talk about how they are feeling and what they are thinking as and when they feel they need to.

Depression

Bereaved children and young people irrespective of their age or cognitive understanding will experience some sort of depression as they grieve.

When the bargaining has failed and the anger has proved fruitless, when the reality that the person who has died is never coming back is understood, the bereaved child or young person will probably experience depressive episodes.

This depression can manifest itself physically whereby the bereaved child or young person does not feel like eating, is lethargic and does not have any interest in previous hobbies or sports. Children and young people may complain of feeling “heavy” or feeling weak.

The grieving process although individual and unique to the mourner, is always arduous and painful. Bereaved children and young people might exhibit behaviour or make remarks that indicate they are confused or becoming absent minded. This is natural. The child or young person’s mind will have been so consumed by questions, guilt, fear, and anxiety following the death of a loved one that they are bound to be confused.

Anxiety originating in bereaved children and young people from the loss of someone they love can permeate in to fears of someone else close to them dying or that they

too might die. Anxiety can also cause some bereaved children and young people to fear that they might forget what the deceased person looked like or how they spoke. Constant fretting and unresolved anxiety can lead to depressive episodes in children and young people.

Therefore, it is important to allow the child or young person to discuss their worries and not try to make them “snap out of it”. They cannot. Allow them the time to express their sadness, whilst ensuring they are able to communicate their feelings as and when they need to.

How can I help?

- Ensure that your bereaved child or young person knows that their feelings are important. Depression can knock a person’s self-esteem and feelings of worth, so help your young person or child to feel valued and cared for.
- Recognise that depression experienced as a response to someone dying is not the same as clinical depression and therefore depressive episodes and symptoms amongst bereaved children and young people are to be expected.
- Encourage your child or young person to participate in hobbies, sports, and existing friendships if they feel ready to.
- If you become concerned about your child or young person’s welfare following the death of someone close, seek the support of Cruse Bereavement Care or your GP.

Acceptance

Gradually as the reality that the death of someone close is irreversible settles in the mind of the bereaved child or young person, the move towards acceptance becomes apparent.

Try to avoid viewing the child or young person’s acceptance of the death as a sign that they are “back to normal”. The term “acceptance” in this case means that the bereaved child or young person has now become aware that the person who has died is never coming back and that life will never be the same again.

Children and young people who have been bereaved will need time to reach acceptance and the length of time needed is dependent on the individual child or young person. To enable the child or young person’s move towards acceptance the maintaining of routines and “normal life” is crucial.

Bereaved children and young people will cope better if their normal routines and daily structure are kept the same. If too many alterations to this routine are made, the child or young person could become confused or anxious as semblances of their daily lives are interrupted.

Remember, the bereavement that the child or young person has experienced will have already dramatically changed their lives and unsettled feelings of emotional security. Therefore, any other changes are likely to heighten their sense of emotional unrest.

How can I help?

- Help the bereaved child or young person to understand that it is okay to laugh, smile and become interested in life again and that this is in no way disrespectful to the person who has died.
- Reassure the bereaved child or young person that not thinking about the person who has died all the time is okay too.
- Help your child or young person to realise that although their lives will never be the same again, this does not mean they will not have a happy life or exciting future ahead of them.
- Participate in activities designed to remember the person who has died with your bereaved child or young person if they ask you to.

Children and Young People's Physical Responses to a Death

Children and young people are likely to experience a range of physical responses to the loss of someone close, including behaviour, mood, appetite, sleep, regression, illness, and pain.

Behaviour and mood

Some bereaved children and young people may exhibit certain physical reactions to the death of a loved one. Again, the behaviours and physical responses that some children and young people might demonstrate whilst they are grieving will differ and no two children or young people will react physically to a death in the same way.

Some bereaved children may act out, have tantrums, shout and scream. This type of behaviour is commonly directed at their caregiver or the person with whom they feel most comfortable. In younger bereaved children, such responses can be common. The bereaved child is struggling to process and articulate their emotions and as a result they can display angry outbursts due to feeling frustrated.

Although it is important to allow the bereaved child or young person to vent their emotions, it is also vital that appropriate boundaries are in place. For example, explain to the grieving child that it is okay to feel sad, mad, or angry, but it is not okay to hit or hurt someone including themselves when they feel this way.

Older children and adolescents may exhibit mood swings that are frequent and unpredictable. This may be how the adolescent behaved prior to the bereavement due to hormonal changes and puberty. However, the mood swings that occur through grieving are more intense.

How can I help?

- Acknowledge that the behaviours and moods of the bereaved child or young person will differ from how they were prior to the death. Remember that behaviours and moods experienced whilst the child or young person grieves can alter over time.
- Reassure your child or young person that feeling angry, guilty, confused and distressed is normal and encourage them to talk about how they are feeling.
- Put in place boundaries to prevent or discourage your bereaved child or young person from hurting themselves or others. Speak with the school / college if you are concerned about your child or young person becoming physically or verbally abusive.
- Contact Cruse Bereavement Care or your local GP if you are worried about your bereaved child or young person's behaviour or moods.

Appetite and eating

Following the death of a loved one, a bereaved child or young person may have a distinct lack of appetite and state that they "Can't face food / eating". Even favourite foods or treats can prove unappealing to the grieving child or young person.

Similarly, a grieving child or young person can have a tendency to overeat or turn to food to self soothe. Bereaved children and young people can also be observed becoming fussy over food and about what they eat.

Difficulties concerning appetite and eating can be further compounded by changes in routine and altered meal times as a result of the bereavement. For instance, if the person who has died was the primary provider of meals to the child or young person, difficulties can occur when someone else takes over this task. If the bereaved child or young person is eating at different times and in different places following the death, this too can prove problematic.

If you suspect that there are drastic and sustained changes in the bereaved child or young person's eating habits, particularly if they are losing weight dramatically through refusing to eat, a discussion with your GP might be needed. Remember to gently encourage the bereaved child or young person to eat and try to keep meal times as structured as possible.

How can I help?

- Understand that increases or decreases in appetite in response to someone dying are common.
- Try to keep meal times as routine as possible to promote normality.
- Some bereaved children and young people might state that they cannot physically face the idea of eating, encourage them where possible to eat little and often.
- If your bereaved child or young person appears to be eating much more than they would normally, try not to restrict their diet or chastise them. Food can, for some bereaved children and young people, be a comfort and afford temporary respite from their grief.

Sleep and sleep patterns

It is essential that the bereaved child or young person has plenty of rest. Sleep is crucial for the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of the child or young person. In the aftermath of the death of someone close, the sleep patterns of a bereaved child or young person can change significantly.

A bereaved child or young person, irrespective of how tired they are, might not be able to fall asleep easily or may wake throughout the night and have difficulty falling asleep again. Nightmares and bad dreams are not uncommon in bereaved children and young people and time must be given for children and young people to discuss these.

Sometimes a bereaved child or young person may be afraid to fall asleep stating that they are scared they will not wake up again. Sometimes a bereaved child or young person may insist that the light is left on and they may display hypervigilance, which means they purposely stay awake in the hope of ensuring no one else dies or anything bad happens during the night.

If a bereaved child or young person has had the nature of their loved one's death explained to them as "falling asleep" this can increase problems around sleep and sleep patterns.

How can I help?

Some children and young people will find it easier to sleep if you talk with them whilst they are in bed and preparing to go to sleep. Storybooks and books to help the bereaved child or young person understand their feelings can be useful too.

Children and young people can also use snuggle or comfort blankets. Some bereaved children and young people feel more secure at night time if they can wrap themselves in a particular blanket that is special to them.

The use of certain calming oils such as lavender can be used to aid sleep and promote restfulness. A few droplets on to the pillow can be used, but do not place straight on to the skin.

Sometimes sitting with the bereaved child or young person (particularly those engaging in hypervigilance) until they fall asleep can help them feel safer.

If your bereaved child or young person tells you that they are experiencing nightmares, encourage them to share them and help the child or young person to talk about any fears or worries they might have.

Some children and young people who slept in the dark prior to the person dying might now want to sleep with the light on. Leave the light on whilst reassuring the child or young person that you will always be close by during the night should they need you.

Regression or Reverting

The death of someone close robs the bereaved child or young person of his/her sense of security and protection, particularly if the person who has died was the child or young person's primary caregiver.

When this feeling of security has been impaired, the bereaved child or young person may be observed to regress or revert to behaviours and speech that were first exhibited in previous developmental stages. It is not uncommon for a bereaved child or young person to suck their thumb, use baby talk, wet / soil the bed or to eat with their fingers.

This is not a sign that the bereaved child or young person will not be able to develop intellectually or mentally, rather it is the child or young person enacting behaviours that occurred at a time when everything was good in their world, pre bereavement.

Prior to the bereavement, the child or young person would most likely have felt safe and secure and now that this security has been challenged, the child or young person seeks to "go back in time" to when things were safe and normal. In general, as the journey through bereavement progresses and the child or young person begins to feel secure again, regressive behaviour should diminish.

How can I help?

- Try not to become alarmed if your child or young person appears to be unable to perform tasks that they were easily able to do prior to the person dying.
- If you have concerns that your child or young person appears to be regressing academically, letting their school know might be helpful.

- Try not to show frustration with your child or young person if they have become absent-minded or forgetful, these are common responses experienced by grieving children and young people and should disappear in time.
- If the bereaved child or young person is bed-wetting and are frustrated and ashamed with themselves, reassure them that it is not their fault and is a normal response when someone they were close to dies.
- If you are worried that your child or young person is displaying regressive behaviours over a long period of time contact your GP, Cruse Bereavement Care or any support agency you feel may help.

Illness - Real and Psychosomatic

When a child or young person is bereaved, they may sometimes complain of illnesses or physical ailments in response to the emotional trauma they are experiencing. Sometimes these illnesses can be real manifestations brought on by eating too little / too much or from not getting enough proper sleep.

Commonly some bereaved children and young people experience psychosomatic illnesses in response to the death of a loved one. This does not mean that the ailment or discomfort that the child or young person complains of is “all in the mind,” but rather that the discomfort parallels the emotional pain they are feeling.

For example, a bereaved child might complain of a headache or upset stomach when actually they are trying to convey their emotional pain in physical terms. Sometimes a bereaved child or young person can become anxious and fretful over the idea that they or someone close to them might fall ill and subsequently die. This is a natural response to the perceived lack of security felt by the child or young person following the bereavement.

A number of bereaved children and young people might start to complain of symptoms similar to those experienced by the person who has died prior to death. If you are finding it difficult to reassure a bereaved child or young person that they do not have a serious condition or terminal illness it might be worth taking the child or young person to see their doctor who can explain to them that they do not have such illnesses.

If the bereaved child or young person is becoming obsessive about a particular illness and it is dramatically affecting their daily lives (not being able to touch door handles, compulsive hand washing, for fear of possible contamination) discussion with your GP might be helpful.

How can I help?

- If your child or young person is convinced that they have a serious illness or terminal illness encourage them to see their GP so that s/he can address such fears and put the child or young person's mind at ease.
- Be aware that your child or young person may describe symptoms that the person who has died experienced prior to death.
- Providing a healthy balanced diet and ensuring the bereaved child or young person gets quality sleep can help to prevent infections and colds that can occur whilst they child or young person grieves. The child or young person's immune system can be weakened as a result of too little food or too little sleep so nutritious food is important where possible.
- If your bereaved child or young person is complaining of a particular ailment, encourage them to discuss how and where it hurts as they might be trying to explain the emotional pain they feel in physical terms.

Children and young people and funerals

Going to the funeral

One of the most frequently asked questions by parents, caregivers and people who support bereaved children and young people is, "Should I take my child / young person to the funeral?" In most cases we would say that a child or young person should be given the choice to go to the funeral / cremation if they want to, unless there are particular religious, cultural or family reasons not to.

Going to a funeral can help children understand the finality of death and joining family and friends in saying goodbye. Explain what the funeral / cremation is for and what will happen. Explain that there are no set feelings they should experience at the funeral / cremation. Include your child or young person in planning the funeral and find ways in which they can take part in the service if they want to, to help them say goodbye. Children and young people may want to write something to be read out during the ceremony or put something in the coffin, or they may want to say something themselves. It is important they do not feel under any pressure to do this.

Explain to them that they can change their mind, even at the last minute and can participate as little or as much as they feel comfortable. You may want to ask someone who you and your child or young person trusts to help take of them during the ceremony, to explain to them what is going on and to go out with them at any point if they wish to do so.

If your child or young person decides not to go to the funeral, make it clear that this is OK. Try to find other ways to involve them - for example, by taking photographs and writing down and talking about what happened at the service. Try to work out with them other ways they can say goodbye.

How can I help?

- Give your child or young person the choice of whether they wish to see the body or attend the funeral / cremation.
- Reassure your child or young person that it is OK if they would prefer not to attend the funeral / cremation and that by doing so they aren't being disrespectful to the person who has died.
- If your child or young person is certain that they would like to see the body and / or attend the funeral / cremation, make sure you explain to them what these entail and what to expect.
- Reassure your child or young person that they can participate as much or as little as they want to. This is OK.
- Try to avoid not talking about funeral / cremation preparations around your bereaved child or young person as they may feel excluded or over looked and may wish to help.

Complicated Bereavement in Children

Complicated Bereavement (also known as complicated mourning, complicated bereavement, prolonged grief) is the concept used when a bereaved person appears to be “stuck” in their grief process or their grief has become a way of life.

Grief is a natural response to the death of someone close and everyone will experience grief in a unique and individual way. Although there are no limits as to how long grieving should last and what it should consist of, practitioners, healthcare professionals and academics agree that if a bereaved person is unable to move forward through their grief, then they are most likely exhibiting complicated bereavement. Both anticipated bereavement (when a person is expected to die as a result of a terminal illness) and unexpected bereavement can be further complicated for children and young people by a number of factors.

Relationship factors

The relationship that the child or young person had with the person who has died is extremely important. For example, complicated grief is more likely to occur if the person who has died was the child's parent, sibling or best friend. If the child or

young person was dependent upon the person who has died or has been diagnosed with mental health problems then the risk of complicated grief increases.

Circumstantial factors

If the death was sudden and unexpected or as a result of suicide the child or young person is at greater risk of experiencing complicated grief. The bereaved child or young person may feel responsible for not being able to prevent the death and in the case of suicide may be acutely aware of social stigma.

Multiple losses

This means that a child or young person who has experienced other deaths previously or has experienced a number of people close to them die in one instance (for example a terrorist attack, natural disaster or road traffic accident with one or more people close to the child or young person involved) are more vulnerable to complicated grief. Also, if before or after the death a child or young person has suffered other losses such as a change in school or the divorce of parents, this too can make complicated grief more likely.

Personality factors

How emotionally resourceful or resilient a child or young person is may determine if that child or young person will experience complicated grief. If a child or young person has poor coping skills, is culturally isolated or financially deprived this can increase the likelihood of complicated grief.

Social factors

If a bereaved child or young person is exposed to poor housing, substance misuse, domestic violence and poverty they can be at risk of complicated grief. The probability of complicated grief is increased if the bereaved child or young person does not have access to social networks and appropriate support systems.

General advice

It is important to remember that not all children and young people who experience any of these factors will automatically experience complicated grief. Anyone can be at risk of complicated grief and not necessarily because of these factors.

The British Medical Journal has described complicated grief as, "...the persistent and disruptive yearning, pining and longing for the deceased." The following are what the BMJ stated as being symptomatic of complicated grief,

1. Frequent trouble accepting the death.

2. Inability to trust others since the death.
3. Excessive bitterness related to the death.
4. Uneasiness about moving on with life.
5. Detachment from other people to whom the bereaved person was previously close.
6. The prolonged feeling that life is meaningless.
7. The view that the future will never hold any prospect of fulfilment.
8. Excessive and prolonged agitation since the death.

As the nature of grief is so individual it can be difficult to identify possible complicated grief. The process of grief can move quickly or can proceed slowly but no change at all can be worrying. An indicator of complicated grief is grief that appears to be stuck or frozen and the bereaved child or young person cannot move towards acceptance of the death. The grief becomes the child or young person's life and they can appear reluctant or anxious to progress on their journey through bereavement.

Complicated grief often requires support therefore if you think that a bereaved child or young person is exhibiting signs of this you may want to contact Cruse.

How can I help?

- Remember that the grieving process differs from person to person and therefore complicated grief can be difficult to identify.
- If you are concerned that your child or young person has become "stuck" in their grief contact Cruse Bereavement Care for support and advice.
- Encourage your child or young person to talk about their feelings and what they are thinking. Talking can help the bereaved child or young person process their grief and feel supported.
- If your child or young person has mentioned taking their own life speak with your GP immediately.
- Do not be embarrassed to ask for help, you are doing the right thing for your child or young person.

Key points to remember

- Complicated grief occurs when the bereaved child or young person becomes stuck within their grief.

- Certain factors such as the relationship the bereaved child or young person shared with the person who has died or the presence of good support systems can increase / decrease the likelihood of complicated grief.
- Complicated grief can be observed when a bereaved child or young person's mourning has become the all consuming feature of their life.
- Bereaved children and young people experiencing complicated grief will require support.
- Grief is a natural response to bereavement but grief that is complicated can be unhelpful and potentially damaging to the mourner.

Where Can I get Help?

The following links may be useful for more help:

- [Helpline](#)
- [Coronavirus](#)
- [Traumatic bereavement](#)
- [Free booklets](#)
- [Useful links](#)

Local Services

Cruse North Wales offer bereavement support, advice, and information to children, young people, and adults when someone dies. They offer this support in a variety of ways such as:

- Face-to-face (Not under the current Corona Virus crisis)
- Phone
- Crisis support
- Pre-bereavement information & support
- Training and courses
- Social support groups
- A wide range of bereavement related support material

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all face-to-face support has been indefinitely suspended. Any new or existing individuals referred will be offered support by telephone instead. To receive immediate bereavement support by phone ring the Cruse National Helpline on 0808 808 1677. The helpline is open Monday-Friday 9.30am-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings until 8pm.

Cymraeg

Croeso i Cruse Gogledd Cymru. Fel ardal rydym yn cynnig cefnogaeth, cyngor a gwybodaeth i blant ac oedolion pan fydd rhywun yn marw. Mae'r gefnogaeth ar gael mewn nifer o ffyrdd:

- Cefnogaeth wyneb i wyneb drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg, Saesneg ac ieithoedd eraill yn cynnwys BSL
- Cyngor mewn argyfwng
- Gwybodaeth a chefnogaeth cyn - galar
- Gwasanaeth plant a phobl ifainc
- Cyrsiau a Hyfforddiant
- Grwpiau Cefnogaeth Gymdeithasol
- Ystod eang o ddeunyddiau i gefnogi rhai sy'n galaru
- I gael gwasanaeth wyneb i wyneb fe fydd rhaid i chi lenwi ffurflen cyfeirio. Edrychwch ar dudalen [Referrals](#).

I drafod pethau gyda gwirfoddolwr Cruse ffoniwch linell gymorth genedlaethol Cruse ar 0808 808 1677 (Saesneg).

Mae'r llinell gymorth yn agored o ddydd Llun - Gwener 9.30am-5pm (heblaw am wyliau banc) gydag oriau estynedig ar ddyddiau Mawrth, Mercher ac Iau hyd at 8pm.

Mae gwefan Cruse yn cael ei ddatblygu ac ymddiheurwn nad yw popeth yn Gymraeg ar hyn o bryd.

Dealing with Bereavement and Covid-19

The Current Situation

Coping with talk of Death and Dying

At times like these, it can be impossible to escape from constant discussion of the crisis going on around us. All news, social media, and conversations are about the current situation. Many of the activities that people use to relax or distract themselves are being cancelled, and an increasing number of people are in isolation.

In a pandemic situation, there is inevitably lots of discussion of death and dying, and this can bring up difficult feelings for those with anxiety and mental health issues. It can also bring up difficult feelings and memories of past bereavements. It may also bring up feelings of fear about dying yourself.

How to help yourself

It can help to take regular breaks from the news and social media. You may want to limit yourself to a few trusted news sources and check only at certain times of the day. You may also like to take regular breaks from social media. It is helpful to keep to a regular daily routine that also includes some time to relax. Think about what activities are the best distraction for you - this could be watching old films or television series, reading, arts and crafts, or getting on with some jobs around the house.

If friends or relatives are talking constantly about the situation, try asking them if you can talk about other things for a while. They might appreciate it too.

There is some good advice for those dealing with anxiety or mental health issues [on the Mind website](#)

If reading or hearing things is making it difficult for you to cope with a bereavement, you can call the CRUSE National Freephone Helpline on 0808 808 1677.

How you can help other people

If you know a friend is feeling anxious, you could suggest talking about something else for a while. Even if you cannot meet in person, try to keep in contact as isolation can make it difficult for some people to cope.

Coronavirus: Grief and isolation

Being bereaved can be a very lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Cruse advice is usually to avoid spending lots of time alone. However, at the moment, many of us need to self-isolate so that we do not catch the coronavirus, or pass it on to others. Grieving while being alone can mean that:

- Your feelings of loneliness and grief are stronger
- You might have to stay by yourself in a place you shared with the person who has died. This can bring up painful memories.

- If you are living with a family in the same house, you may be able to support each other. However, sometimes being together all the time can lead to tension or arguments.
- It is harder to deal with your grief because everyone is also worried about the coronavirus situation.
- You may be left without someone to share your feelings with, or to help you with meals and shopping
- Tips for how to help yourself and others:
 - Keep in touch with others using the phone, text, internet, or social media
 - Look after yourself and get rest.
 - Try to get some fresh air or sunlight each day -even opening a window can help. Keep to a regular routine.
 - Ask for practical help from friends, family, or neighbours.
 - Do not feel guilty if you are struggling.
 - Try to stay in contact with bereaved friends and family even if you cannot visit (on the telephone, or send a letter or card)
 - Help someone else if you know they are struggling.
 - Let a bereaved person talk about how they are feeling and about the person who has died.

Corona Virus: Funerals and memorials

- When someone dies, we usually have a funeral service. Funerals are important because:
 - They help to make the death seem real.
 - They give us chance to share our thoughts and feelings about the person who died.
 - It helps us say goodbye to the person.
 - They bring families and friends together to support each other.

At the current time, funerals are changing because of the coronavirus. When groups of people come together, they might catch or pass on the coronavirus. At the present time:

- Only close family will be able to go to the funeral.
- Funeral services may be much shorter.
- You may have to wait a long time to hold a funeral.

Tips for how to help yourself and others if you cannot go to the funeral:

- It may be possible for someone to record or film the funeral.

- You may be able to write or record a message to be read out or played at the funeral. Contact your funeral director for advice.
- Ask those who were there to call you and tell you about it.
- You could have a memorial in the future to remember the person who has died.
- You could set time aside to have your own private goodbye.

You could hold your own memorial at home. You could:

- Look at pictures.
- Play some of the person's favourite music.
- Write a message to them.
- Light a candle.
- Follow any of your own cultural or religious rituals.

If you know someone who cannot go to the funeral of someone close:

- Stay in touch after the funeral, and let them know you are thinking of them.
- Share your memories of the person who died.

How Cruse can help

- The CRUSE National Freephone Helpline remains open - call 0808 808 1677. Opening hours are Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when they are open until 8pm.

Further Information

Cruse information

[Hope Again - Cruse's website for young people](#)

Other charities and organisations

[Childhood Bereavement Network - Covid-19 resources and links](#)

[Winston's Wish - Coronavirus information](#)

[Child Bereavement UK - Video on supporting bereaved children during the virus](#)

[Nelson's Journey - Guidance for families around funerals](#)