

Supporting children and young people who are experiencing grief or loss – Guidance for parents/carers

This guidance has been produced to support parents and carers in the event that your family suffers a bereavement. If you would like further information, please contact your child's school who can support you in accessing more specialist services including support from Jigsaw4U. Further signposting is also provided at the end of this document.

Common feelings associated with grief:

- Shock and disbelief. Children and young people may feel physical symptoms of shock including feeling sick or dizzy. Others might struggle to process the information and revert to protective behaviours or go back to their play/what they were doing before.
- Denial is another common feeling experienced after a loss. For children this can be because they don't understand that death is permanent and therefore talk about the person coming back, or search for them.
- Anger and 'acting out' behaviours are often seen when a child or young person doesn't have the words to express the other emotions that they are feeling. They can also feel angry with the people who didn't prevent their loved one from dying and the person who has died.
- Guilt is another common feeling associated with grief in which a child or young people may feel that they could have done more to stop the person from dying. Guilt can also be felt if their last interaction with the person who died was a difficult one.
- Sadness and/or feelings of helplessness. When they realise that the person who has died isn't coming back feelings of low mood are common. This could result in your child losing their appetite, becoming lethargic or uninterested in things they previously enjoyed.
- Worry and anxiety. It is especially common that a child or young person may worry about other family members, displayed by them becoming distressed at separations.
- Difficulties focusing their attention, especially on demanding tasks like schoolwork. Children and young people may also have difficulties sleeping which reduce their concentration even more. Others may experience vivid memories for a time.

These feelings can be more intense if the death has been sudden, traumatic in some way, or if the child or young person is experiencing other changes or transitions in their lives.

It is important that parents/carers, as well as children and young people are aware of the range and intensity of the feelings that are often felt as a result of grief. The sense of feeling out of control as they move quickly through a range of emotions is more common in children than adults. If not normalised, this could lead to a young person isolating themselves away from the social support that they need.

Over time the feelings will become easier to manage and your child will feel more able to accept what has happened. This doesn't mean that they are 'back to normal', but that they are able to manage the normal routines of life more easily.

Children's understandings of death:

Children's understanding of death changes as they get older. Young infants will have a sense of loss and may be more fussy or clingy than usual.

- Between the ages of **2 years and 5 years**, children begin to develop an interest in death but can't understand the permanence of it. They may show a lack of emotion or ask lots of questions, including when the person will return. It is important to provide honest answers that cannot be misinterpreted by the child. Children in this age group may experience disrupted sleep, changes in behaviour or developmental regression.
- **Primary school aged children** begin to understand the irreversibility of death and may 'fill in any gaps' in information with their imagination. They may become anxious about the safety of themselves or others. It is important to offer honest information and a supportive setting for them to ask questions. Children of this age benefit from 'normal routine' including attending school.
- **Teenagers** often have strong beliefs about death, but struggle to access support and feel isolated in their grief. Some teenagers become withdrawn; others may increase their risk-taking behaviours. Peer support and maintaining a 'normal routine and boundaries' is beneficial to bereaved young people.

What can you do?

Look after yourself and seek out support if you think you need it. Give yourself time to relax and also time to grieve.

Encourage them to ask you any questions they have.

Share memories about the person who has died. In time you might want to create something that reminds you of them.

Be honest about what happened and share that you are feeling sad/shocked/angry too.

Make sure they know they are not to blame for what has happened.

Listen and acknowledge their worries and reassure them that these are normal.

Try and keep up the routines that you had before the death. Consistency is really helpful.

Try and put their feelings into words for them and reassure them that they won't feel like this forever.

Talk about what has happened using language that they can understand. It is more helpful to say that someone has died, rather than euphemisms like "we've lost Grandpa" or "Grandma has gone to another place". Story books can also be helpful.

Ensure that children know all emotions are ok. If they are feeling angry it is not alright for them to hurt themselves or others though.

Reassure your child if they are worrying about other people they love becoming ill, or dying.

Think about what would help you to feel safe and secure at this time, and plan for children from this.

Try to make sure that all adults speaking to the child are using consistent language and sharing the same information.

Give them a different way to communicate their emotions such as through play or drawing, or channelling energy through physical activity.

Further support:

JIGSAW4U (pre and post bereavement support)

<https://www.jigsaw4u.org.uk/>

CHILD BEREAVEMENT UK

www.childbereavementuk.org

CRUSE (bereavement care)

www.cruse.org.uk

CRUSE materials for Coronavirus: dealing with bereavement and grief

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

WINSTON'S WISH (website for grieving young people and their families)

www.winstonwish.org

Further support can also be sought from your Health Visitor, School Nurse or GP.