

# Supporting a child or young person when someone important has died

This leaflet is designed to help you support your child through the process of loss and grief



*“It is important to remember that grief is normal and with the right help and support, most children and young people will be changed, but not damaged by what has happened”*

Child Bereavement UK:  
How Children and Young People Grieve

## How children and young people grieve

Bereaved children and young people may experience a range of intense feelings - sadness, anger, confusion, numbness, guilt, helplessness, loneliness and other feelings depending on their age and circumstances. Even babies can experience feelings of loss and will sometimes literally search for the parent who has died.

Some children may lack the words to verbalise what they are feeling and express it through their behaviour for example becoming more clingy, struggling to separate eg to go to school, angry outbursts, becoming withdrawn, sleep problems, nightmares, eating or toileting issues that weren't apparent before. It's common for children to 'puddle jump' in and out of grief, happy one minute, sad the next. Because children have a limited capacity to hold information about situations which present a lot of stress, challenge and uncertainty, they may sometimes respond inappropriately eg. laughing,

to cover up fear or sadness. It's important that children feel comfortable about expressing whatever they are feeling at the time. As a parent or carer you can help provide the reassurance they need simply through your own behaviour - so they can see that it's ok to be sad and cry and to feel angry sometimes, but it's also ok to be able to smile and enjoy things. All of this will help them make sense of their emotions and reassure them that what they are feeling is normal.

## What they need to know

Whatever their age children need to hear the news that someone has died as soon as possible and to have their questions answered. They may want to know why this has happened and what will happen now, in a way that they can easily understand and which reassures them about the future. Young children in particular need clear, honest language - euphemisms such as 'passed on', 'gone to sleep', 'gone home', are likely to be misunderstood. They may need

to know that when someone is dead their body doesn't work anymore, they don't feel anything, they won't get hot or cold and don't need to eat or drink. Very young children may believe that the dead person can return and the surviving parent or carer may need to explain that this isn't possible and, sometimes, to regularly repeat this information. Older children are likely to need more detailed information about why, how and where the person died. It's important to reassure all children, whatever their age, that it is always ok to ask questions and that you will try to answer them honestly, whether it's now or in the future.

### Saying goodbye

Children and young people need to be able to say good bye to the person who has died and given the opportunity to be involved, perhaps to help choose flowers or music for the funeral or place something in the coffin. Many adults worry about children attending funerals but it's important for children and young people to have this opportunity. Adults often tell us of their regrets at not being able to attend the funeral of someone who was close to them when they were a child. Some children may want to see their loved one's body and say goodbye and with the right kind of support, information and preparation, they can do this even when very young.

### Giving reassurance

It's important to answer children's questions honestly and reassure them about their fears and anxieties. Children may be frightened that their surviving parent or carer might die and whilst you can't say that this won't happen, you can help children to understand that it is extremely unlikely and that if anything did happen auntie, uncle, granny, family friend would be there to look after them. Children sometimes worry that they were responsible for the person dying so it is important that they know they weren't to blame and that nothing they did or didn't do caused the person's illness and death.

### Getting on with life

Bereaved children need the love, care and understanding of their family and friends and others in their lives, but they still need routine and boundaries such as regular meal times and bedtimes, and to be able to continue with the activities and interests they previously enjoyed. Parents and carers often struggle to know when a child or young person should go back to school. School can provide routine, structure and familiarity. Some children want to go back the day after someone has died or soon after, whereas others may need to stay at home with the family until after the funeral. Every child and young person is an individual and it's important to give them the chance to say how they feel, talk it through with them and make a decision based on this. It's important that schools know when someone close has died so that they can be aware that the child or young person may need extra support or the opportunity to have time out.

### Remembering

Like adults children and young people may need to tell and retell their bereavement story and it's important that these stories are heard. It's common for them to 'revisit' the death of someone at different times in their lives and experience many different feelings as their maturity and developmental understanding of death changes.

Memories are particularly important – photos, precious objects, journals, letters and video clips are all ways in which children can develop memory stores and maintain their bond with the person who has died.

It can sometimes be difficult to spot when a child or young person is in need of extra support or guidance – if you are concerned please contact the Family Support Team on 01225 721479 and we will be happy to talk it through and offer support and advice.

For further information, contact the Family Support Team: 01225 965 803  
Alternatively, contact the Clinical Coordination Centre: 0345 0130 555