

Guidance for adults supporting children and young people that have been bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic

‘Generally people deal with adversity in a sensible way. People don’t usually panic. People cope. People are tougher than we sometimes give them credit for. People show great courage, resourcefulness, adaptability, resiliency, hopefulness and humanitarianism (Wessely, 2005).

Understanding bereavement

The processes involved in coping with bereavement and loss are more complex than often understood. The so-called ‘stages of grief’ are rarely experienced in a linear fashion, and delayed (post-traumatic) reactions to grief are not unusual.

Research suggests that individual differences between children and young people means that often they will react to sad or tragic events in an individual way. Those who support children and young people through bereavement and loss therefore need to be aware of differences in:

- Gender.
- Age.
- Receptive and expressive language.
- Emotional literacy and confidence.
- Family dynamics, security and structure.
- Religion and faith.
- Prior experiences.

It’s important to acknowledge that the impact of bereavement and loss on children and young people will depend on its context and its consequences. We should be careful about making simple assumptions as to the impact of a bereavement based on our own beliefs.

Grieving and isolation

That said, being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Advice is usually to avoid isolating yourself, but we are in a situation where this is required of many of us.

This can make feelings of loneliness and grief more intense. A bereaved family might be isolated together, and although this may be a support at times, at other times tensions and resentments may be magnified. If children and young people are isolated it may be difficult to keep them occupied whilst adults deal with their own emotions and fears. The impact of dealing with a bereavement, compounded with feelings of worry about external situations, can mean that feelings of grief aren’t fully expressed.

Isolation can also make it harder to process grief. At times like this when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, people can find themselves distracted from dealing with their grief.

Practical concerns and considerations may also come up. The person who died may have been a partner, parent or carer, and the bereaved person may be left without practical or emotional support at a time they need it most. Friends and relatives who might otherwise have been able to provide practical support (such as help with meals or shopping) may be unavailable or preoccupied with their own family's situation.

Supporting a bereaved child or young person

Help and support for children and young people who experience bereavement is best provided by a trusted, familiar adult, as and when it is needed. In time, most people that have been bereaved will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for specialist counselling.

When adults are talking to bereaved children and young people it is important to:

- Tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and that you want to understand and help them.
- Use words that are appropriate for their age and level of understanding.
- Give the information a bit at a time, allowing them the opportunity to ask questions. Older children will want to, and be able to, handle more information.
- Use pictures and storybooks where appropriate. These are particularly helpful for younger children or children with additional needs.
- Encourage children and young people to ask questions. Answer their questions honestly and simply.
- Accept that some things can't be 'made better'.
- Remember that 'super parents' or 'super teachers' don't exist. Do and say what you can.
- Reassure them that their reactions are normal.
- Pay more attention to, and spend extra time with, them.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Avoid taking any emotional response personally. Help them to understand the relationship between anger and trauma. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings (drawing, taking exercise or talking).
- Avoid being surprised by changes in their behaviour; they will return to their usual selves in time.
- Emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen.
- Advise on, and monitor, their social media usage.

Reintegration of a bereaved child or young person into school if attending during the pandemic

- Talk to the family and child / young person, if age appropriate, to see what s/he would like to happen when they return to school.
- When they return, acknowledge their loss: 'I'm sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad. It is OK to cry'.
- Talk to the child and young person's current peers attending school about how people are affected by grief and encourage them to share their own feelings.

Ask about how they have coped with bereavement in their own lives and what has helped.

- Discuss how difficult it may be for the bereaved child / young person to come back to school. Ask how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after a death. Acknowledge that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general bereaved children and young people say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being 'overly-nice' to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don't want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.
- Allow the child / young person access to a 'quiet room' where he/she can go to be alone. Agree a way to communicate this (e.g. signal or exit card).

Caring for the carers



Put on your own
oxygen mask
before helping
those around you.

It is important to acknowledge how emotionally demanding supporting bereaved children and young people can be. Our capacity to be emotionally responsive is predicated on our own sense of coping and wellbeing. If you are supporting a bereaved child or young person, take time to help yourself, to help them.

Useful websites

Anna Freud Centre	https://www.annafreud.org/media/11242/looking-after-each-other-ourselves-final.pdf
Childhood Bereavement Trust UK	https://www.childbereavementuk.org/online-learning-for-schools
CHUMS	http://chums.uk.com/downloads/
Cruse Bereavement Care	https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief
North Yorkshire County Council	https://cyps.northyorks.gov.uk/sites/default/files/SEND/Loss_bereavement_guidance1.pdf
Stars bereavement support service	https://talktostars.org.uk/what-we-do/about-stars/
The Compassionate Friends	https://www.tcf.org.uk/content/what-we-do/
The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement	https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncscb-guidelines-responding-death-student-or-school-staff.pdf
Winston's Wish	https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/ , https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/ and https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-funerals-alternative-goodbyes/

This guidance has been written by Educational and Child Psychologists working for Cambridgeshire County Council's Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Service (0 – 25). Please contact Cambridgeshire County Council's SEND Service (details at <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/local-offer>) for further support and information.

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