

What helps grieving children and young people

childbereavementuk.org/information-what-helps-grieving-children

One of the most frequent questions asked by adults caring for grieving children and young people is ‘How can I help and what can I do?’

Every child is unique and will cope with the death of someone important in their own way. There is no magic formula, but we hope that this page will help you better understand what it is that grieving children need. It has been written with input from children and young people we work with and based on their real experiences.

How can I help and what can I do?

Grieving is exhausting for everybody, child or adult, but is eased if everyone can do it together and find their way through as best they all can. You can do a huge amount by carrying on as much as you can with the usual routines of home, school, time with friends, etc. At the same time, try to support one another when the grief feels all-consuming.

In the early days after a death, what children of any age need is extra care and concern from the adults around them. Sudden death means there may be no opportunity to say goodbye and children can feel very angry with their parent or sibling who has died and left them. They may have regrets about something they said or wish they had said. They need to know from parents and carers that they are still loved, that they will continue to be looked after and that they will be involved in any decisions that affect them.

What else is needed in the following days and weeks will be dependent on how the child responds, their individual personality, and the circumstances of the death. It is very normal to feel rather out of your depth and unsure what to do for the best. It might help to remember that grief is a normal response to a death and no one knows your child better than you. Provided with love from their family, and support from friends and school, most children do not need professional help, but if you are in doubt about this, please do seek guidance from the Child Bereavement UK Helpline on 0800 02 888 40.

How truthful should I be?

Adults naturally want to protect, but children have a much greater capacity to deal with the harsh realities of life than we realise, as long as they are told in an appropriate way. Even a very sad truth will be better than uncertainty and confusion. What a child does not

know they tend to make up and their fantasies can be very distressing to them and difficult to deal with.

One child said:

It helps to know why everyone in the family is sad and worried because when you don't know what is happening you can't help thinking it's your fault.

Children and young people need information given in words appropriate for their age and understanding. Without information, they cannot start to make sense of what has happened. Children pick up on atmosphere and will be aware that there is something that everyone else knows about but not them. This can create feelings of exclusion and isolation from the rest of the family.

When there are no secrets, a family has the chance to get closer together; the children can trust in the adults around them and are more likely to express their feelings more freely, talk about any fears, and be able to receive reassurance and comfort.

The word 'dead' feels very harsh, should I use it?

Phrases such as 'gone to sleep' or 'passed away' or words such as 'lost' may feel kinder, but are misleading and can lead to confusion and complication - we encourage children to find things that they have lost so they may continue to look for the person who has died. Similarly, using the term 'gone to sleep' may lead them to associate going to sleep with dying which can result in anxieties at bedtime.

Saying the person 'went away' may cause the child to feel abandoned or think he or she did something wrong and is no longer loved.

Use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is much more helpful for children when adults use words such as 'dead' and 'died' rather than euphemisms.

They keep asking me questions, how should I answer them?

Questions need to be answered honestly, and in simple language suitable for the child's age and understanding. This may seem harsh, but bereaved children tell us that they need adults to speak to them in a way that is clear and unambiguous. It is helpful to reassure a child that it is OK to ask questions and to talk about what has happened.

Children are very literal and may have a different understanding of words such as 'heart attack' to that of an adult. It is easy to assume that they know what we are talking about. Check their understanding by asking them what they think a heart attack is.

Young children may need repeated explanations and answers. This can be very wearing and hard to deal with, but it is a child's way of fitting together all the pieces of the jigsaw. Questions from a child are sometimes not about more information, but more a way to check out that what has happened is true and not just a bad dream.

Will they need any time off school and if so, how much?

When their world has fallen apart, the familiar routine of school can feel safe and secure and is a helpful reminder for a child that not everything has changed. As was said earlier, what bereaved children and young people want is a sense of normality. School can provide this. School also offers a chance to have some time off from grieving.

Most of the children that we see at Child Bereavement UK want to get back to school after one, or at the most a few days. Some children do need a few days more at home, but the longer they are away, the harder it is to return. Returning to school after the death of someone important does need to be handled sensitively and the child should be asked how they would like this to be managed. It is always a good idea to let school know what has happened and to keep in touch with staff, who may find it helpful to know about our Schools' Information Pack and the dedicated section for schools on our website.

How can I help my child to express their feelings?

Children of all ages do not like to feel under pressure to express powerful emotions; it can feel too painful or just not the right time. Talking is only one way of doing this and for many young people, it is not what they find easy to do. There are alternatives. A shared activity such as walking the dog or playing a game takes off the pressure and therefore can be a time when a child will start to share thoughts and feelings. Developing a memory box together is another idea to encourage communication. Working through an activity or workbook together can be another good way to gently open the door on the subject.

I feel very sorry for my son but he is behaving badly, should I discipline him?

Children can feel very out of control and scared when experiencing the death of someone important and may respond with challenging behaviour. Your usual daily structures and routines will feel comforting for a child of any age, but especially young children. Try to change these as little as possible, although this may feel very difficult to do when you are exhausted emotionally and physically. Try to continue with normal standards of behaviour but 'normality with compassion' is a good yardstick to use. Anger forms a large part of the grieving process and children of all ages will express it in various ways.

It was just total anger, you couldn't explain it. It was to nobody and about nothing, it was just anger and it was building up inside me.

Giving the message that it is understandable for them to be angry is what they need to hear. However, they also need to know that it is not acceptable to hurt themselves or anyone else. Safe ways to release anger that we use with our bereavement groups include bashing cushions, vigorous physical exercise, a very messy painting session involving hands, going outside to shout very loudly and throwing wet sponges against a brick wall. Any of them can help.

For how long will they grieve?

Children and young people will continue to grieve for life. With support from adults around them, they will learn to adjust to life as it has become, rather than how it used to be, but the loss will always be with them.

I didn't feel anything for the first 3 months. For the next 6 to 8 months I couldn't really handle myself or my feelings. Then after that, it took me a long time and a lot of tears but I managed to calm down. Ever since then it's like a long road up a hill.

Children and teenagers may need to look again at the details surrounding the death of an important person in their lives as they grow older. Feelings they had when young will be different several years further on as their understanding matures and the meaning of the death changes as they move through life. This is not unresolved grief but the experience of different feelings later in life, often connected to major life events such as moving up to senior school or other change.

Is it okay for my children to see me upset?

Your children need you to be a model, not a hero. Share your feelings with your child; children learn to grieve from the adults around them. If parents are open and expressive, their children are likely to be so too. On the other hand, they will learn to close down and bottle up emotions if adults are distant and always attempting to keep their feelings under control.

You have your own grief to deal with, which at times will understandably be overwhelming. It is difficult for children to share emotions with an adult who is continuously overcome by grief or depression. If you can, share the load and get support from friends and other family members by asking them to have the children for a few hours. This will give you space to express any raw grief without having to maintain some control for the children, resulting in you feeling stronger for times when they are around.

Sometimes it can help for the child to talk to someone who is not emotionally involved

This could be a family friend, or other adult, who is prepared to give some time and listen properly. Teachers can play an important role here, particularly in a primary school, as they see a child on a daily basis and can keep a look out for signs of distress or changes in behaviour.

Do keep in contact with your child's school and ask them to ensure, without going into detail, that all staff are aware of what has happened. There is a special section on the Child Bereavement UK website for schools offering guidance and support. Children are very protective of adults they care about and may choose to talk to someone else in order to avoid causing further distress. The teenagers we see at Child Bereavement UK tell us they find sharing experiences with people their own age, using the internet, to be helpful.

Family pets may take on a new significance. One young boy told us that his dog was a source of comfort because it felt warm and soft to cuddle. It let him talk as much as he wanted to without interruption, didn't judge him, and gave him unconditional love and affection.

Will it help them to see a bereavement support practitioner?

Particularly in the early days after a death, counselling is not usually what children of any age want or need unless the death has been in very traumatic circumstances. The bereaved children we work with tell us what they need initially is to be with adults who they already know and trust, rather than a stranger with whom they have to spend time building up a relationship. However, in time, needs will change and some children find speaking to a bereavement support practitioner helpful, but others will not. Anthony said, 'Counsellors are helpful I feel because they won't necessarily ask you questions – they just say 'tell me how you are feeling'. But Emily, aged 17, told us 'There is no way that I was going to go to the school counsellor.' Seeing a support practitioner will not help a child who is not yet ready for this type of support.

Looking after yourself is essential

The first step to supporting a grieving child or young person is to get support for yourself. It is not a sign of weakness or not being able to cope if you seek help from others. Don't expect too much of yourself - managing life and your own grief, at the same time as trying to support a child or young person, is exhausting.

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