



Supporting Children and Young People After a Bereavement

How do children grieve?

Children may experience the feelings of grief just like adults, but they do not always express it in the same way. Children's understanding of loss depends on their age and development, and they may show their grief through changes in behaviour, play or mood, rather than with words. It is very normal for children to move between emotions quickly, perhaps extremely distressed one moment and then seemingly unaffected the next moment. We cannot prevent them from experiencing the pain of loss, but we can help them in their sadness.

How do teenagers grieve?

Adolescence is a time of great changes; teenagers are developing their own identity and emotions run high. Part of growing up is becoming independent and this is often a time of conflict with loved ones. If someone close to a teenager dies during this unsettled period, feelings can be confusing and unbearable, and teens may try to hide their grief to avoid appearing vulnerable. Grief and shock can cut people off from one another and often, we try to protect others from how we are feeling, but talking about things could really help.

What do children understand about death?

Children under 6:

- May not understand that death is forever and expect the person to come back
- Take explanations literally and may need you to repeat them often
- May show regressive or disruptive behaviours
- May cry, be anxious about separations and want to share a bed
- May demonstrate 'magical thinking' - young children can imagine that they are responsible for death because they believe their thoughts, wishes, or actions can influence events in ways that are not possible.

Primary school aged children:

- Begin to understand that death is forever and may find it scary or fascinating
- Lack the vocabulary to express feelings and may show regressive behaviours
- Can be afraid that other loved ones may die

Teenagers:

- Have an adult understanding of death, express their grief in adult ways and may want to be included
- Recognise that life will never be the same and dread feeling different from their peers



- Some cope best by talking to the family about feelings and loss, others seek to be more independent and prefer help from friends or trusted adult

Common grief reactions include:

- Anxiety and worry about other family members which may result in separation anxiety
- Feel overwhelmed by intense feelings of anger and act out with unexplained behaviours
- Sadness and longing
- Guilt, self-reproach and blame – this can be irrational e.g. ‘I made her cross, so she’s gone’
- Difficulties in concentrating
- Problems with sleep, not wanting to go to sleep or waking from distressing dreams
- Physical health complaints – unexplained aches and pains

How can we help?

It is important to talk to children about what has happened using words that they understand. It is recommended to **use the words ‘dead’ or ‘died’** and avoid euphemisms like ‘passed’ or ‘gone away’, as this can make it much harder to explain the permanence of death when the person does not come back. Accept that the child might only want to talk for a few minutes and then move on. It is normal for you to have to repeat your explanations and don’t assume that they have understood first time.

It is often said that you should not be a hero, but a model to children and young people. If you try to shield children from the truth they are likely to sense something is wrong and imagine their own horrors or worry about why their feelings are so different to those around them. Encourage them to explore their feelings and share their worries through talk, play, art and acknowledge your own. Ask if anything is worrying them and reassure them that **‘nothing they said or did or thought caused their loved one to die’**. Be honest in an age appropriate way. It is very hard for a child to have conflicting stories or to learn the truth from somewhere else other than their family.

Even though routines are disrupted, having regular mealtimes and bedtime routines help a child to feel safe. Try to avoid unnecessary separations and give clear directions about who will be caring for them and when you will be back or when they will be able to talk to you.

It is not unusual to have difficulties with sleep after a bereavement. [*Health for Kids - How can I help my child sleep](#) and [**Childline – Problems sleeping](#) (for teenagers) recognise how good sleep is essential for children to feel happy, healthy and better able to manage their grief. Check out the websites for help and advice about getting a good night’s rest.

Many families find it helps to:

- Participate in rituals or find opportunities to say goodbye. This might be by viewing the body, attending the funeral, writing a letter, or drawing a picture to be put in the coffin. Children should always be well prepared and allowed to choose how they are included, with the option to change their mind at any point.



- Make a memory box or book which can be decorated and keep photos, keepsakes, drawings, and stories that remind the children of their special person.
- Talk about the person who has died, share stories and memories and celebrate anniversaries and birthdays.
- Keep listening to what children are saying and acknowledge that things are strange and difficult, but you are all there to support each other as a family.
- Keep children informed and reassure them that their loved one knew they were loved and cared for.
- Look after yourself, you have been bereaved too and are managing your own grief. Sometimes parents/carers worry that they have done or said something wrong. Remember you are doing your best and you might have to say, 'I'm sorry, I think I might have explained this wrong' or 'I should have done but I wasn't sure what would help'. That's okay. We are only human.
- Reach out for support from **The Sunflower Project** (tel: 07781 433838 or referrals@youthcommission.gg) which supports bereaved children and young people. For adults, the Guernsey Bereavement Service can be contacted on 01481 257778.

Useful Websites and Resources:

- Child Bereavement UK- How Children and Young People Grieve
<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people>
- Winston's Wish – offers fantastic advice and information for supporting bereaved children
<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/>
- Health for Kids - How can I help my child sleep - <https://www.healthforkids.co.uk/grownups/health-issues/how-can-help-child-sleep/> (select 'view site without local content')
- Childline – Problems Sleeping - <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/feelings-emotions/problems-sleeping/>
- We have lots of books available that can be really helpful for children, please reach out if you are interested.

