



Bereavement Support

Children's Understanding of Death at Different Ages:

The biggest factor in how children react a death will depend on what they understand. The following will explain how pre-school and primary aged children may understand death.

- Children may begin to develop an understanding that death is final and permanent.
- Children mostly have an awareness of death having a cause and being irreversible, but younger children do not necessarily see it as inevitable, particularly in relation to themselves.
- As children become older, they begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life.
- Children may believe that their thoughts or actions caused the death.
- Children may become curious about the physical aspects of death and the rituals surrounding it. Children may also think of death as something spooky, like a zombie, or a spirit that comes to get you.
- Children can become fearful as a result of their deepening realisation of their own future death.

Age and Understanding:

All children are different and a mature 4 year old may have a better grasp on the situation, and of a full understanding of what being dead means, than a child who is older. An older child generally understands more. The increasing realisation of the full implications of someone dying can be too much to bear, resulting in self-protecting denial and appearing OK.

How Children and Young People Grieve:

Children and young people can grieve just as deeply as adults do but can show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by mirroring the responses of adults around them and rely on the adults to provide them with what they need to support them in their grief. Children have a limited ability to put their feelings, thoughts and memories into words and may 'act out' with behaviours which are out of character rather than express themselves verbally. They will gradually learn emotional vocabulary by listening to the words that you use. By showing your grief it will empower children to feel they can express theirs. Their behaviour is your guide as to how they are, and this is as true for a very young child as it is for a teenager. Children are naturally good at moving in and out of their grief. They can be intensely sad one minute, then suddenly switch to playing happily the next. This apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe children are unaffected, but this "puddle jumping" is a type of in-built safety mechanism that prevents them from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings. As children get older, this instinctive "puddle jumping" becomes harder and teenagers may spend long periods of time in one behaviour or another. For a young person, getting on with life might mean a hectic social schedule as their way of shutting out the pain. Or they may withdraw into themselves, rejecting offers of help and generally being

very hard to communicate with. If this is the case, try to stick with it and continue to let the young person know you are still there for them, but without putting pressure on them to talk. The difference between adult and child grief is sometimes illustrated by the following: a child jumps in and out of puddles of grief, but an adult is in a deep river, swept along with the current, finding it very difficult to get out.

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 will make up and their fantasies can be very distressing to them and difficult to deal with. Children and young and young people need information in simple, concrete words that are appropriate for their age and understanding. Without information, they cannot start to make some sense of what has happened. Children pick up on atmosphere and will be aware that there is something that everyone else knows 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 will lead to confusion and complication. We encourage children to find things that they have lost and if they associate going to sleep with dying, this commonly results in anxieties at bedtime. Saying the person “went away” may cause children to feel abandoned or to think he or she did something wrong and is no longer loved. Questions need to be answered honestly, and in simple language suitable for the child’s age. This may seem harsh, but it is really helpful for children and young people to hear information in a simple, clear way that leaves no room for ambiguity. It is also helpful to reassure a child that it is OK to ask questions and talk about what has happened. Children are very literal and may have a different understanding of the words such as “heart attack” to that of an adult. 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.

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

When their world has fallen apart, the familiar routine of school feels safe and secure, and is a helpful reminder for a child that not everything has changed. School can provide a sense of normality that may help them to feel a little less uncertain and a little more in control. Some children do need a few days 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 asked how they would like this managed. It is always a good idea to let school know what has happened and keep in touch with staff.

Common responses, feelings, and behaviours:

It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close even if the resulting feelings and behaviours look and feel far from normal. Adolescents and teenagers find it hard to reveal intense and difficult feelings with family members when life for them is already full of challenge and uncertainty. Remember that a child's attention span corresponds to the amount of information they can handle at any one time. When they reach their limit, they may substitute feelings that they can handle for those they cannot. For example, a child may laugh inappropriately to avoid talking about fear or sadness. This may appear uncaring but is actually a safety mechanism to prevent emotional overload. How a child or young person responds to someone dying will be influenced by their age and understanding, the relationship they had with the person who died, and how that person died.

Children and young people can feel very out of control and scared when experiencing the death of someone important and respond with challenging behaviour. Your usual daily structures and routines will feel comforting for a child of any age and especially young children. While there may need to be flexibility to these, try to change them as little as possible although it may feel very difficult to do when you are exhausted emotionally and physically. Anger can play a common part in bereavement and children and young people can express it in various ways. Try to be consistent with your normal expectations of behaviour but with compassion. Children and young people need to know that all feelings are valid. They need to know that it is OK to be angry, but it is not OK to hurt themselves, other people, or damage property. Find safe ways to deal with the anger such as dancing to your favourite song, kicking a football, blowing bubbles or find a quiet place to shout.

How can I help and what can I do?

Every child is unique and will cope with the death of someone in their own way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and children and young people may experience a wide range of different feelings and that's OK.

Grieving is exhausting for everybody, child or adult, but is eased if everyone can do it together and muddle through as best they can. By carrying on as much as you can with the usual routines of home, school and social activities can provide a sense of predictability when things feel quite uncertain whilst supporting each other when 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. A sudden death means there will be no opportunity to say goodbye and children can feel very angry with the person who has died and left them. They may have regrets about something said or wish they had said. Children and young people need to know from parents and carers that they are still loved, that they will continue to be looked after despite what has happened, 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 not sure what is best to do but 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.

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 not the right time. Talking may help them to express their emotions but this is not always easy for them to do. It is important to give children and young people time and space. Activities such as walking, playing games or art may relieve any pressure they feel and they may start to share their thoughts and feelings. Creating a memory box, book or painted pebble may also open communication.

Is it OK for my child to see me upset?

Children learn from the adults around them and you can model this by sharing your feelings with them. Children whose parents are open and expressive will most likely mirror this. Just as children whose parents are distant and rarely show emotion will most likely learn to bottle up their emotions. You have your own grief to deal with too which can also be overwhelming at times. Children may find it hard to share their emotions with someone who is overcome by their own emotions. If you can, take time for yourself, get support from family and friends who may be able to care for the children for a short space of time. This will give you time and space to express your grief as needed and therefore stronger when supporting the children.

For how long will they grieve?

Children and young people will continue to grieve for life, however, with the 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. Children and young people revisit the details of the death of an important person as they grow older. Feelings they had when young will change as they become older and their understanding matures and the meaning of death changes as they move on through life.

Will it help to see a bereavement counsellor?

Many children, young people and adults who experience a death will have a support network of people around them that they can lean on. However, there may be experiences when children, young people and adults need extra support. If you have concerns about a person's wellbeing following a death encourage them to see their GP in the first instance. Their GP will be best placed to arrange appropriate support.

Self-Care.

It is important to look after yourself. Daily life, managing your own grief and supporting a child or young person is exhausting. Take time for yourself where you can and seek help

from others. It is not a sign of weakness getting support for yourself but will enable you to support your child.

Useful websites:

- <https://www.winstonswish.org/>
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>
- <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>