

**A Psychological Guide for
Families:
Bereavement in Childhood**

**Child & Family Psychology
and Therapies Service**

This booklet is part of a series that has been written by Child Clinical Psychologists and Psychotherapists from the Gwent Child and Family Psychology and Therapies Service.

How to use this booklet

Many parents and carers experience concerns about their children and at times, look for support or advice. Suggestions about how to support your child are made in this booklet, and these may be helpful at different times. We hope these suggestions will add to the supportive things you may already be doing. It is important that you choose the ideas which fit for you, your child and your family. Additional resources are listed at the back of this booklet if you would like more information.

This booklet is about helping children cope with bereavement. It aims to provide understanding about what children may experience when someone is dying or has died, and some ideas about how to support them during these times.

Talking to children about death

Whatever your age and circumstances, coping with death and dying can be very difficult. We all might react differently at different times, and it can be hard for parents and carers to know what to say, and how best to support their children.

All parents and carers want to protect their children from painful experiences, so telling a child about a death can be very hard. Sometimes we may feel unsure what to say, feel worried about upsetting our child, or feel concerned that we may be asked questions which are difficult to answer. It is very important though that children are included in discussions about what is happening.

Children often pick up on events and feelings very quickly, so letting them know what is happening can help them manage anxiety, reduce fear and confusion, and know that they are supported.

Prepare the ground

Whilst there are often uncertainties around death and dying, providing some explanation to children early on can help them understand and prepare for what might happen. This can reduce shock and being open and honest will also reduce the risk of children misinterpreting what is going on.

If children have questions which are hard to answer then be honest and explain why it is difficult. For example: -

"It's difficult for us to know exactly when he/she might die, but we think it might be soon – perhaps in the next few days or weeks"

"He/she died because he/she had an illness. I don't know all the details but the doctors haven't been able to make it better this time"

The dying process is often accompanied by physical and emotional changes, and it is important to explain why these have occurred and that they are still the same person inside even though they might look or feel different.

Talking about death

Try to be as clear as possible to avoid confusion. Do not say that someone has 'passed away' or has 'gone to sleep'. These explanations may lead children to think that the person is coming back, or that going to sleep is dangerous. Using language including the words 'death' and 'dying' can feel awkward but may lead to less confusion. It is also important to give the message that the person who has died is not coming back, though there are ways to remember them through talking about them, photos, keepsakes etc.

Try to keep in mind that children do not have the same understanding of death as adults. They may worry that the person is still in pain or is lost.

Sometimes talking about death can evoke anxiety in children that parents may suffer the same fate, i.e., "Gran has these cells that mean she may die, does that mean you and Daddy will die too?" Be prepared to repeat your explanations as children's questions will reflect where they are at in their development, and they may need deeper explanations the older they get.

Reactions to death

People react to death in different ways, and at different times. The following reactions are common:

- Feeling sad, angry and confused
- Becoming preoccupied with thoughts and questions about life and death
- Keeping busy to avoid difficult feelings
- Wanting to talk either a lot or not at all about what has happened
- Becoming more sensitive or argumentative with others
- Feeling guilty that they had not done enough and should have done things differently
- Denying it and pretending it is not happening

The above reactions can sometimes present as mixed up; causing distress and making everyday situations and interactions more difficult. It may feel very hard to manage the usual ups and downs of life, and the normal tasks of living with all these

feelings going on. Such feelings can be experienced by both children and adults and are a normal part of the grieving process.

Children's reactions to death and dying are different from adults in that they often have less understanding about how they feel, and that grief is a normal response. Sometimes children may:

- Become withdrawn or quiet, or ask lots of questions
- Fear that they or others will die and become cautious or protective
- Become busy and seem unconcerned by the death
- Experience disturbances with eating, sleeping or toileting
- Become angry towards the person who has died and those around them
- Become superstitious or show 'magical thinking' – thinking they can make things better or acting as if they have some indirect control over events
- Think that the death is their fault
- Appear not to care, as a way of avoiding the hurt (this can be upsetting for parents)

At these times, let your child know that you are thinking about them and are available to them should they wish to talk or seek comfort. It may be that they want more physical comfort, and to hear you talk about feelings and thoughts about the death. Try to express empathy (e.g. '**gosh, this is really hard**'), and acceptance (e.g. '**I know, you really miss him/her – I can see why you wouldn't want to play right now**') or name feelings (e.g. '**I wonder if you're feeling cross about that because it reminds you of Grandad, and that's really hard and sad for you**')

It is important to let your child talk about and express any difficult feelings, and assure them that these will come and go. In time let them know that it is okay for life to go on, to start to enjoy things again, and that this does not mean that the person who has died is forgotten. In time, you may also want to consider ways to remember the person who has died such as talking about them, looking at photos, writing letters or messages, visiting places which were important, or having keepsakes which were important or valuable to them.

Parental/carer grief

Extra emotional and physical demands may be placed on carers when someone is dying/has died. Not only are you trying to carry on with your normal activities, you may also be trying to cope with your own grief and help your children cope with theirs. It is important that you allow yourself time to deal with your own feelings, and this can better equip you to support your children. It can be helpful for children to see parents grieve and talk about some of their feelings, so that they know this is okay and do not have to pretend everything is fine. You can explain that you feel the way you do because someone has died, and that you miss them. Also, that anger, sadness and fear are normal responses and that there are different ways of letting them show.

Sticking with routines wherever possible is helpful to children of all ages, as it provides them with a sense of security, and the idea that life carries on in spite of this sad event. While some children may be reluctant to go to school/nursery, it can

help to provide a routine outside of a grieving household. They may though need more reassurance that parents will be okay during their absence.

Coping at different ages

Pre-school

Pre-school children tend to spend a lot of time with and be very attached to key carers. They may feel strongly that they want to make things okay again if their carer is upset or affected by a death. Especially as language at this age can be limited, their feelings may be shown through their behaviour which can include increased clinging or neediness; greater self-sufficiency than would normally be expected; disrupted sleep, feeding or toileting, and more challenging or unsettled behaviour. At these times, it is important that carers seek support for themselves so that the child is aware they are being taken care of. Pre-schoolers may not understand that death is permanent, and it may be that keepsakes, memories, photos etc can help keep a connection with the person who has died whilst also giving the message that they will not return.

School age

School age children may be better able to grasp the permanent nature of death, and having a chance to say goodbye may be important. They may be affected by the changes in routine which can occur, and it may be useful to talk with your child's teacher to make them aware of the bereavement and think about how your child can be supported. If there is a culture in your child's school of discussing life events perhaps in a group or circle time, then it may be that the loss can also be discussed here. It may be more appropriate for this to take place in time and after the immediate grief period has passed. It would also be important to consider on an individual basis, whether you think this would be helpful for your child and whether they are ready to do this.

Teenagers

Teenagers can respond to bereavement in different ways and it may be that they deal with grief in more adult ways, may have some greater emotional maturity and wish to appear grown up. Some teenagers however may be more likely to bottle things up or return to an earlier stage of development as they try to make sense of what has happened and manage feelings about their loss.

This may simply be their way of dealing with things, and as with all young people it is important to let them know that grief is natural, it is okay to feel sad, angry, overwhelmed etc at these times and that you are there to support them.

Funerals

Deciding whether children should attend funerals can often present a dilemma for parents and carers, and it is common to feel that they are too distressing for a child. Funerals do give young people a chance to say goodbye however, and children can also be upset by not being included. When talking with your child about a death,

you can also talk with them about funerals and explain what they are for, who might attend and how people sometimes react. A description of the place where the funeral will take place can also be helpful. This can help your child to understand and prepare for the event, and to make their own decision about whether to attend. It might be important to let them know that whatever decision they make is okay, and that it is also okay for them to change their mind.

Asking for professional help

Grief can be difficult and painful, but is a normal reaction to a loss. When considering if your child needs more specialist help, it is important to consider the child's health and overall functioning (e.g., are they attending school? Able to engage in social and family activities at least some of the time? Eating/drinking normally? Sleep patterns?). Also, how long their behavioural reactions (as previously listed) have been occurring. If you are concerned about your child's well-being, and feel that their behaviours are not showing any signs of improvement it is important to seek advice. You can do this through an appointment with your GP or health visitor. You can also contact one of the resources listed overleaf who may be able to provide support or advice, and send you information to help you support your child.

Useful Contacts

Winston's Wish – a charity providing information and support to bereaved children, young people and families.

Freephone national helpline: 08088 020 021

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK – charity supporting families where a baby or child is dying/has died, and when a child is facing bereavement

National helpline: 0800 02 888 40 or e-mail: support@childbereavementuk.org

www.childbereavementuk.org

Cruse Bereavement Care – helpline, support, information and counselling for anyone who is bereaved. Cruse also now has a dedicated website for young people called Hope Again.

Tel: 0808 808 1677

www.cruse.org.uk or www.hopeagain.org.uk

Dying Matters – coalition organisation aiming to help people talk more openly about dying, death and bereavement. Website has leaflets for talking to young people.

www.dyingmatters.org

St Christopher's Candle Child Bereavement Service – London-based hospice and charity. Has a series of useful leaflets on their website about children and loss (see advice and resources tab, and 'useful leaflets' link).

www.stchristophers.org.uk

Sands- A charity that aims to support families affected by the death of a baby or a miscarriage.

Tel: 0808 164 3332

Email: helpline@sands.org.uk

<https://www.sands.org.uk/>

St David's Hospice Care: Unicorn Project- Aims to help children and young people access the support they need to manage the impact of the death or serious illness of a significant adult in their lives.

Tel: 01633 851051

<https://stdavidshospicecare.org/our-services/support-for-children>

ChildLine – 24hr free helpline, 1:1 online chat support also available

Tel: 0800 1111

The Samaritans – Free, 24 hours support for a variety of issues.

Freephone: 116 123

www.samaritans.org.uk

Additional reading and books

These books are as recommended by Winston's Wish and Cruse, to help children and young people coping with bereavement and loss. When choosing a book for your child it is important that you check the book is appropriate taking into account factors such as age and stage of development, culture and faith, circumstances of loss, and relationship with the person who has died.

Winston's Wish books

A Child's Grief – general guide to supporting children through bereavement

As Big As It Gets – supporting children when a parent is seriously ill

Never Too Young to Grieve – supporting under 5's through bereavement

You Just Don't Understand – supporting bereaved teenagers

The Family Has Been Informed – supporting children from military families

Beyond the Rough Rock – supporting children through bereavement by suicide

Hope Beyond the Headlines – supporting children through bereavement by murder or manslaughter

Story and/or activity-based books

Milly's Bug-Nut by Jill Janey – story of a family finding their way through bereavement

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine by Diana Crossley – activity book for bereaved younger children

Out of the Blue by Julie Stokes and Paul Oxley – activity and information book for bereaved teens

The Secret C by Julie Stokes – booklet helping parents and carers to talk with children aged 7-10 about cancer

The Scar by Charlotte Moundlic – story for younger children about a little boy dealing with the death of his mother and finding ways to remember her

The Sad Book by Michael Rosen – short book about Michael Rosen's own struggles with sadness following the death of his son

The Heart and the Bottle by Oliver Jeffers – story for younger children of a little girl who shuts her heart away in a bottle to keep it safe following a bereavement

A Monster calls by Patrick Ness – story for older children and teenagers about a boy dealing with the illness of his mother

Vicky Angel by Jacqueline Wilson – story involving a little girl dealing with the sudden loss of her best friend

My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece by Annabel Pitcher – story of a 10-year-old boy and his family dealing with the loss of his sister in a terrorist bombing

Drift by Jenny Alexander – novel for young adults about a young person dealing with the suicide of her sister

Further reading suggestions and resources are available on the above-mentioned websites, as are various downloadable leaflets dealing with different themes of dying, death and bereavement.

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

Please let us know what you think about this booklet

1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	1	2	3	4	5	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Very helpful

3. What might you do differently now that you have read this booklet?

4. Please tick the box and give us your address if you would like to receive another booklet from our range.

Adversity	
Anger	
Anxiety	
Behavioural Difficulties	
Bereavement	
Separation and Divorce	
Siblings - Helping your children to live with and learn from each other	
Sleep Problems	
Sleeping walking, nightmares and night terrors	
Soiling	
Trauma	

Do you have any other ideas for booklets?

Your name and address

Thank you for taking the time to give us your comments. Please return this slip to us directly or by giving it to the person who passed the booklet on to you.

Please return to Child and Family Psychology and Therapies Service
Llwyn Onn, Grounds of St Cadoc's Hospital
Lodge Road, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3XQ

**“This document is available in Welsh /
Mae’r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg”.**