

A Psychological Guide for Families: Bereavement in Childhood

Child & Family Psychological Health Service

Introduction

This booklet is part of a series that has been written by Clinical Child Psychologists from the Gwent Child and Family Psychology Service. Many parents and carers experience some concerns about their children and at times look outside of their family for extra advice or suggestions. We hope that this booklet will add some ideas to the things that you are already doing. Many suggestions are given in this booklet, and all of the ideas given have been helpful to some families at certain times. Choose the ideas that fit for you, your child and your family. This booklet is about helping children to cope with bereavement.

Whatever your age, coping with death can be a very difficult experience, whether someone dies suddenly, or they have been ill and their death is expected. Adjusting to the death of someone can create a huge challenge for a family as individual family members might react differently to this event at different times. It might be very difficult for parents and carers to know how best to support their children and what to say. Different members of the family may need different things and this can change.

This booklet aims to provide some understanding as to what a child might be experiencing when they discover that someone they know is dying or has died. It also aims to provide some ideas about how to support that child.

Breaking the news

All parents try to protect their children from painful experiences. So telling a child that someone has died can be extremely difficult. Sometimes parents and carers aren't sure how to break the news and sometimes they don't want to as they don't want to upset or worry their child, or be asked questions that they find difficult to answer. However, it is important that children be included so that they can understand what is happening and so they don't feel left out.

Preparation

Telling a child that someone is going to die can be especially difficult, as it has not yet happened and you won't always know when it is going to happen. However, explaining to a child early on can help them understand and better prepare them for the person's death, so that it is not so much of a shock when it does happen.

It is also important for parents and carers to be open and honest with their children. A child may hear part of a conversation and misinterpret what is going on.

If, at these times, a child asks questions that are difficult or impossible to answer, then be honest and explain why it is difficult or why you don't know. For example:-
"I honestly don't know when he might die but we think it might be soon, in the next few days/weeks"

"He died because he had an illness inside his body. I don't fully understand it as you need to be a doctor to understand but the illness was so bad nobody could make it better."

Whilst a person is dying they may change physically, become weaker, lose weight, lose hair. It is important to reassure a child that they are the same person even though they look different. It is also important to explain why changes have occurred, e.g. treatment or illness, or injury.

Talking about Death

Try to be clear in what you're saying to your child so that they don't become confused. Explaining that someone has 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep for a long time' or 'gone to the clouds' may lead a child to think that the person will come back or that sleeping is dangerous. It may feel awkward saying that someone has died but it will lead to less confusion for the child. Be mindful of a child's understanding of death. They may worry that the person still feels pain, which could lead to them being upset about the funeral. It may be useful to explain that the body no longer works and that therefore the person who has died no longer feels pain. Children will continue to have lots of thoughts and questions about the person's death so be prepared to repeat your explanations.

Different Reactions to Death

The reaction to death and dying can vary tremendously between different people and is likely to change over time. A person might experience one or more of the following:

- They may become sad, angry and/or confused.
- They may become preoccupied with thoughts and questions about life and death.
- They may avoid their feelings by becoming very busy.
- They may want to talk a lot about what has happened or they may not want to discuss it at all.
- They may be very sensitive and argumentative with others.
- They may feel guilty that they hadn't done enough or that they should have done things differently.

All of these feelings can occur. They can become jumbled up together so that a person feels like they are on an emotional rollercoaster. In turn, this confusion and distress can make everyday situations and interactions very difficult and overwhelming. It may feel hard to carry on with the normal 'tasks' of living whilst these feelings are going on inside. With children around life does go on, and the usual ups and downs will add to the confusion of feelings. Be assured that such feelings are experienced by adults and children alike and are a normal part of grieving.

The Child's reaction

Children will react in a range of ways, just as adults do. Possibly one difference between children's and adult's reactions is that children will have less understanding about how they are feeling and that grief is a natural but complex reaction. They may,

- become quiet or withdrawn. They may ask lots of questions.
- fear that they or others will die and become very cautious or protective of those people.
- become very busy and seemingly unconcerned by the death.
- experience disturbances with their eating and sleeping patterns or toileting, in that they may eat or sleep much more or much less than they used to.
- become angry towards the person who has died, or towards others or themselves.
- become particularly superstitious, as if they have some indirect control over people's lives or events.
- 'act out' their pain by becoming disruptive, defiant or aggressive.
- think that they are to blame for the death.

Try to let your child know that you are thinking of them. Reassure them that their difficult feelings will come and go. Let them know it is okay for life to go on and for them to enjoy themselves again. This does not mean they have forgotten the person who has died. Let them know you are there for them. Your child may not want to talk. They may not have the words but they may want to listen to you talk about your thoughts and feelings about the death. They may want more physical comfort.

Parent's Grieving

It is a very demanding time for you, so it is important that parents and carers make some time for themselves to experience their own feelings. Adults need time to grieve too. By allowing themselves some space and time, parents and carers will be better equipped to support their children.

Not only do you have to carry on with all the normal parenting activities but at the same time you are trying to support your child/children and understand their reaction. In amongst all this there is your own grief to cope with. For this reason it is useful for a child to see their parents and carers grieving as this teaches them that it is all right to experience and talk about such difficult emotions. If a child does not see adults grieving they may feel that they must pretend everything is okay and this could complicate their distress further. Often it is helpful to explain to your child that you feel the way you do because you are missing the person that has died. Talk about anger and fear and of the different ways of letting them show.

Coping and Reacting at Different Ages

Pre-School

When a child is of a pre-school age they tend to spend a lot of time with a particular adult, such as their mum or dad, and feel very attached to that person. If that person is also affected by a person's death and they are upset, the child may feel they want things to be okay for them again. It is important, therefore, for that person to find support for himself or herself so that the child is aware that they are being taken care of. Also, for pre-schoolers in particular, they may not be able to understand that death is permanent. It has been suggested that collecting keepsakes about the person that has died, such as photos and other reminders of them can help the child feel connected to the person but also gives the message that the person will not return.

School Age

School age children generally have a better understanding of the permanent nature of death. This age group, however, are more affected by change to routine, both at home and in school. It may be useful to meet with the child's teacher to discuss how to best support them during this time. The teacher, with the child's permission, may also be able to involve the other children in the class in supporting them by having classroom discussion. This will encourage children to have a better and more sensitive understanding of the situation and might help prevent any teasing.

Teenage Years

Some teenagers might deal with the grief process in a more adult way as they are older and because they often want to be grown up. It is also at this age that they are more likely to bottle things up and their schoolwork and relationships might suffer.

Other teenagers might return to an earlier stage of development. This might simply be their way of grieving. It is important that teenagers understand that whatever age you are, grieving is natural.

Funerals

There is often a dilemma for adults about whether children should attend funerals. It is understandable to think that the experience may be too upsetting for a child but children are often more upset when they are not included. Funerals do give children a chance to experience the finality of death and the process of saying goodbye. Conversations about funerals might be usefully held when you're discussing the person's death with your child. Explain such things as why funerals occur, what happens, who will be there and how people might react. This allows children to make their own decision about whether to attend. Whatever decision a child makes it is important to keep checking out whether they have changed their mind and reassure them that changing your mind is okay.

Asking for professional help

Grieving is an upsetting experience for adults and children alike but it is a normal reaction, so how do you know if a child is coping or if they need more specialist help? It is important to consider the child's health and for how long their behavioural reactions (as listed previously) occur. If you become concerned about your child's health or that the behaviours aren't changing it is important to speak with your General Practitioner. Alternatively, there are a list of contacts overleaf who could discuss your concerns with you or send you more information to help you support your child.

It is important to remember that whether you are an adult or child, grieving can have a huge long lasting impact on your life, but it is part of a normal and natural process.

Useful contacts

Winston's Wish A charity that offers information and support to bereaved children, young people and their families. They provide lots of helpful resources.

The Clara Burgess Centre,
Gloucestershire Royal Hospital,
Great Western Road,
Gloucester
GL1 3NN

Tel no: 01452 394377
Family Line (Mon-Fri, 9.30-5.00 pm):
0845 20 30 40 5
Email: info@winstonswish.org.uk
Website: www.winstonswish.org.uk

The Childhood Bereavement trust (CBT) A charity providing information for bereaved young people and families and for those professionals in contact with the families such as nurses and teachers.

Aston House
High Street
West Wycombe
HP14 3AG

Tel no: 01494 446648
Email: enquiries@childbereavement.org.uk
Website: childbereavement.org.uk

Childline A 24hr helpline for young people. There is also information on bereavement on their website.

Freepost 1111
London
N1 0BR

Tel no: 0800 11 11
Website: www.childline.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care Provides a helpline, information, support and counselling for anyone bereaved.

Tel no: (Mon-Fri, 9.30-5.00pm)
0870 167 1677
Website: www.crusebereavement.org.uk

The Samaritans Provides support either by phone, email, writing or in person if you visit one of their branches.

Tel no: 08457 90 90 90
Email: jo@samaritans.org
Website: www.samaritans.org.uk

Suggested books (as recommended by Winston's Wish)

Age 0-6

Remembering Mum by Ginny Perkins & Leon Morris (ISBN 071 364 432 X)

This is a practical guide that includes colour photographs and text to describe how a family copes with the death of the mother. There is also a book in this range entitled "Remembering my brother".

There's no such thing as a dragon by Jack Kent (ISBN 189 924 8951)

The consequences of ignoring difficult feelings about a person's death are illustrated through this story. A mum will not accept that a dragon exists and as a result the dragon gets bigger and bigger. By reading this book with your child it might help them to discuss the death and their feelings with you.

Grandpa by John Burningham (ISBN 014 050 8414)

This is an award-winning story describing the relationship between a granddaughter and grandfather. However, the end of the story will need some explanation and discussion with your child.

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney by Judith Viorst (ISBN 068 971 2030)

This story is about a boy whose cat has died and he spends time remembering the things they did together.

Frog and the Birdsong by Max Velthuijs (ISBN 086 264 9080)

This is a story about a frog finding a dead blackbird. The frog then spends time with his friends thinking about death and the feelings they have. The ending of this story could be a little confusing for small children and would probably need explanation.

Badger's parting gifts by Susan Varley (ISBN 000 664 3175)

This is a well known story about a group of friends coping with Badger's death. It is available in a number of different languages.

Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs by Tomie De Paola (ISBN 014 050 2904)

Tommy lives with his family, grandmother and great grandmother. The story is about how he copes when both his grandmothers die.

Age 7-12

John's Book by Jill Fuller (ISBN 071 882 8704)

When John's father dies suddenly, he and his mother have to work out how they are going to live without him. John begins to understand the range of emotions he is experiencing such as anger, grief and bewilderment, and begins to plan for the future.

Two weeks with the Queen by Morris Gleitzman (ISBN 0141 303 00X)

Twelve-year-old Colin finds it difficult to accept that his brother is terminally ill. He finds a friend in an older man named Ted who helps him to express his feelings and understand what he has to do.

Two weeks with the Queen by Morris Gleitzman (ISBN 014 180 0739)

Same title but in audiocassette format.

A summer to die by Lois Lowry (ISBN 044 021 9175)

Thirteen year old Meg tells the story of the illness and death of her older sister Molly who has leukaemia.

Gaffer Samson's Luck by Jill Paton Walsh (ISBN 014 031 7651)

This is the story of a boy's relationship with an elderly neighbour who wants to die peacefully.

Charlotte's Web by E B White (ISBN 014 030 1852)

The classic children's story describes the relationship between Wilbur the pig and Charlotte the spider. It provides an accessible introduction to the life cycle and to the subject of death.

Good-bye, Chicken Little by Betsy Byars (ISBN 006 440 2916)

Jimmy Little feels responsible for the death of his Uncle who is killed whilst attempting to cross a frozen river. Gradually he begins to talk about and understand his feelings.

Steve: A story about death by Marjorie Newman (ISBN 074 963 2844)

Eleven year old Steven, his nine year old sister and their mum face life together after dad is killed at work by a falling wall.

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson (ISBN 014 031 2609)

This is the story of the friendship between two ten year olds and the difficulties one of them experiences when the other dies in an accident.

Geranium Morning by E Sandy Powell (ISBN 0 87614 380 X)

This book tells the story of a young boy whose father dies in a road accident and the friendship he makes with a girl whose mother is dying of cancer. Both children find ways of coping and helping each other.

AGE 13 – 18

I never told her I loved her by Sandra Chick (ISBN 070 434 9477)

Frankie struggles to cope with her mother's death. All she can remember are the arguments they used to have and the times her parents quarrelled. Gradually she and her father begin to talk about their loss, and she begins to plan her future.

The Charlie Barber treatment by Carole Lloyd (ISBN 074 455 4578)

Following the sudden death of his mother from a brain haemorrhage, Simon clams up and cannot talk. It is only when he meets a girl called Charlie that he begins to be able to talk about how he is feeling.

See Ya Simon by David Hill (ISBN 014 036 3815)

This book tells the story of a young boy who has to begin to cope with the sudden and violent death of his father, during a raid on his shop.

The spying game by Pat Moon (ISBN 184 121 1737)

When Joe's father is killed in an accident he has to try and cope with his feelings of anger and hate.

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 Service
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Grounds of St Cadoc's Hospital
Lodge Road, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3XQ