



Dandelions
Bereavement Support

Supporting a child through grief.

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Bereavement Support Co-ordinator

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Introduction.

When somebody we love dies, it is a traumatic time of often overwhelming change. If you are the parent or carer of a child who is impacted by a loss, it can be difficult to know where to begin in explaining the situation, and helping them to work through their grief; especially if you are trying to work through your own feelings at the same time.

We've put together this booklet to give you some ideas on how to include and support your child during this sad time. Of course, these are only suggestions and ideas, you know your child better than anyone else and will find what works best for your family.

For more support, please contact our Bereavement Support Coordinator, Fay Bloor, on 01332 345268, who will be able to signpost you on to appropriate means of support.

Breaking bad news to children.

The news that someone has died or is likely to die should be given to the child as soon as reasonably possible, and should preferably be broken by someone the child knows and likes.

Delaying sharing the news may result in confusion and fear, or the child finding out in a less supportive way, such as overhearing a conversation or being told in the playground. Finding out in this way can undermine the child's trust in the loved ones that remain and lead to difficulty expressing their grief as it teaches the child that grief is something to be hidden, not talked about.

Be fully prepared

Find a quiet place where you are unlikely to be disturbed and remember to turn off or silence your phone so you are not distracted whilst breaking the news. Choose a moment that gives you plenty of time to explain, answer questions and allows the child to process the news a little before having to do anything else, so not right before school or a club etc.

Have a rough idea of what you need to say and how you will explain it to them before you start. Also make sure you have as many answers to the questions they may ask as possible.

Be honest

The child needs you to be as honest as possible, even though the truth may be difficult to explain to them. If they later find out that you've skirted around or slightly bent the truth to make it more comfortable, it can compromise trust and make them reluctant to talk to you about their grief.

Avoid euphemisms

Children are often very literal, telling them that the deceased has 'gone to sleep' may lead to a fear of bedtime, in case they too do not wake up again, or may not portray the finality of death. Or telling the child that you've 'lost' the person can cause confusion and them searching for the 'lost' relative. Instead, tell the child in age appropriate but honest language what has happened.

Don't wait until the death to tell them

The more prepared the child is for the death the better. Hiding a terminal diagnosis from them does not prevent them grieving longer, it robs them of the chance to spend time making precious memories with their loved one, takes away the chance to have the meaningful conversations and to say a proper goodbye; all of which can help the child through their grief once the death occurs.

Explain fully

It's easy to forget that terms that we hear or use frequently may be new to children, or they may not fully understand what they mean. For example they may have heard the term 'died' before, but not fully appreciate what it means, or that it is permanent. The same is true for medical terms, try and break down what they mean into simple, age appropriate terms. For example, instead of simply telling a young child that their loved one has died, try something along the lines of that their loved one was very, very poorly, so poorly the doctors could not fix them, even though they tried their best to; because the person was so poorly their body stopped working and they died. This means that they no longer breathe and their heart no longer beats, they cannot feel or do anything and this cannot be changed.

Be aware that the child will most likely ask you if you or they will die, again be honest but reassuring. Yes, everybody does die but usually not until they are very old, it may help to use an example of an elderly friend or relative that is still in good health. It may also help to reassure them that if the very worst happened and you were to die before they have grown up, someone they like and trust will take care of them. The child needs to know that they will be ok and looked after.

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Be aware that you may have to keep answering the same questions

Children, like adults, will process the information bit by bit and may have to ask the same questions a few times to make sense of the answers. Whilst it can be hard to have to repeat painful details, try to be patient and understand they are trying to work through it, just as you are.

'Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?' by Else and Alex Barber is a good book for explaining sudden death to young children and may help to explain an expected death too. Visit the library at our Macklin Street office to borrow our copy*.

*Subject to availability

Funerals.

Should the child attend the funeral?

Attending the funeral can help the child make sense of what happened to their loved one once they died, it shows them that the person didn't just disappear. It also shows the child that it is ok to talk about death and losing that person.

You know your child, and will know what is best for them, but generally even very young children can benefit from attending the service. Speak to them about whether they want to attend the service and explain fully what a funeral is and what is likely to happen, so they can make an informed choice and that on the day they are prepared for, and will understand what is happening.

If you are worried about juggling your own feelings and taking care of the child at the funeral, why not ask a trusted friend or relative to take care of them on the day. This person should be one that the child likes and trusts who, ideally, is not as immediately affected by the loss. The child can still be with you throughout the day, but it means you don't have to worry as much about providing them with all the support, you can take a moment if needs be and you won't have to leave the service if the child finds it too much.

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Involving the child in funeral arrangements

Involving the child in some aspects of the funeral arrangements can help to open up conversations about the loved one and some of the memories they shared; it can give them a way to express how much that person meant to them.

Involving the child in funeral arrangements teaches them that it is ok to talk about death; it normalises it, making it feel less frightening. Asking the child to help choose a coffin means they will know what to expect on the day, asking them to help choose flowers and music (perhaps from a shortlist of pieces you think are suitable) will help them feel involved.

Should the child view the body?

There is no set right or wrong answer to this, it depends greatly on the child, the cause of death, the time elapsed since death and the experience of the last time the child saw the person alive (if the person was in a lot of pain and it was a difficult experience for the child, it may help to see the person looking peaceful). Be guided by your funeral arranger's opinion, or arrange to come and see the person's body before bringing the child, sometimes people can look a little different after death and this may be distressing for the child.

Also be guided by the child, ask them how they feel about it, explaining thoroughly what they are likely to experience. As adults we often take for granted that the person will be in their coffin when we go to see them, and we expect that they will feel cold to touch; these factors will be shocking to a child that wasn't forewarned.



Explaining what happens at the funeral

It is very important that the child knows what to expect on the day of the funeral, it makes it less frightening and will prevent them from needing to ask questions whilst the service is taking place, which can be difficult to answer in the emotions of the day.

A good place to start is by explaining what a funeral is and why we hold one. Funerals mean slightly different things to different cultures and there will be different traditions and rituals in each one, so the way you explain it will be specific to that. There are similarities in most cultures, funerals are a way to remember, mark and give thanks for a person's life, as well as dispose of the body.

Again, the things we take for granted may be shocking to a child that has never attended a funeral before. Let them know when and where the funeral will be, if you are having limousines explain that a long car will pick you up from one address and take you to the place of worship/crematorium/cemetery following the hearse, make sure they know that the coffin containing the loved one's body will be there, but it's nothing to be frightened of. Remember to explain that they might see other people crying, but they also might see people laughing; explain that this is because they are remembering good times with the person, not because they do not care they are gone.

The books 'Suzie Goes to a Funeral' by Charlotte Olson and 'What Happened to Daddy's Body?' by Elke and Alex Barber may be useful in helping you describe what may happen on the day of the funeral. Charlotte Olson's book focuses just on cremation but Elke and Alex Barber's book looks at both burial and cremation. Visit the library at our Macklin Street office to borrow our copy*.

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Explaining burials

Be very honest but explain things gently and reassure them that the process does not hurt their loved one, their body no longer works so they cannot feel pain, or feel frightened or lonely.

Explain that after the service (if there is a service beforehand), the coffin with their loved one in is taken to a place called a cemetery or churchyard in the hearse, the special long car that transports the coffin. There will be a pre-dug hole called a grave that the coffin, with the person's body in, is lowered into as prayers or words of comfort are said. The family may throw soil or flowers on top of the coffin to symbolise the person's return to the earth. Make sure that the child knows the grave is not usually filled whilst the family is there, this may surprise them on the day.

Consider allowing them to help pick a headstone for the grave, making sure that they know this usually can't be placed for a while after the funeral as the ground needs to settle. Our funeral arrangers will be able to find out an approximate time scale for you, it can vary from place to place depending on soil type.

Explaining Cremation

A place to start might be to explain that cremations take place in a building called a crematorium, often the whole service may be held there or the family may choose to have a service in a place of worship before or afterwards.

Cremation can sound scary so needs to be explained gently, honestly and fully to the child. It is extremely important to stress that their loved one can no longer feel pain or heat so the burning of the body does not hurt or scare their loved one.

Explain that the body is burnt in a special oven, not like the one at home, called a cremator. The cremator is very, very hot; the person is placed inside the cremator, still in their coffin, and after a while becomes ashes. The ashes are available to collect from the funeral director in a couple of days after the service or can be scattered directly at the crematorium. If you choose to collect the ashes, explain that they will come in a special box called an urn and let the child know what you plan to do with the ashes, whether it's keeping them or scattering them somewhere that was important to the person that died.



How might a child react to bereavement?

- Become clingy and have increased separation anxiety.
- They may or may not appear anxious. Just because they do not appear so doesn't mean they're not grieving.
- Repeatedly ask the same questions as they try and make sense of what has happened.
- Act out the situation in play (informally observing this may give you clues about how they are feeling).
- Younger children may know that someone has died, but still on some level expect them to return.
- They may 'regress' to behaviours from a younger age such as tantrums or bed wetting.
- Copy coping mechanisms of those around them (so it pays to be mindful of the example you are setting, is it a healthy one?).
- Experience mood swings, the grief may appear to come and go.
- Angry outbursts and increased levels of aggression towards family, friends or toys.
- More regular small physical complaints such as headaches and tummy aches that may be due to anxiety.



- They may find forming relationships harder as the loss may make them feel different from their peers who have not experienced loss. They may also be worried about forming relationships with someone they may then lose.
- Become worried about their own health and that of those around them.
- Exhibit challenging behaviour.
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions.
- Change in school performance.
- Disturbed sleep and nightmares, they may want to share your bed.
- Trying to act like and adult.
- Over the top reactions to small things, such as excessive crying over a very minor injury.
- Not wanting to go to school, this could be because they are anxious about being separated from you, or it could be that their friendships have changed slightly since the loss as the child is somewhat different; this can be uncomfortable for the other children around them who do not understand why they have changed.
- Appearing sad or withdrawn.



Working through the grief together.

Keep routines and boundaries where possible – When a child loses a loved one, many things in their life change, this can feel disorientating and can undermine their feeling of safety, making the loss feel even harder. If possible, try to keep consistency in routines and the people that surround the child. This can help their world feel a little safer again.

Similarly, children need consistent boundaries around their behaviour so they know where they stand. However, this needs to be balanced with the understanding that children may well act out if they do not know how to express the difficult feelings they are experiencing; as we've said, it is not uncommon for children to have angry outbursts or refuse to go to school etc. Remember, the child may 'act up' for you and not others, not because you're doing anything wrong, but because they feel safe in knowing your love for them is unconditional, they do not fear being rejected by you for doing something wrong.

A gentle conversation with older children about their behaviour may help to find the feelings that are underpinning it, which you can then work through together. With younger children that may not yet have the words to describe how they are feeling, it may help to informally observe their play, often children will express those feelings in the make believe games they play; this can give you clues about how they are feeling or thinking about.

You know the child best and will know where to draw the boundaries with their behaviour, it may not happen straight away but you will find the right level.



Validate their feelings – The child needs to know that it is natural to feel like they do, and that they do not need to hide those feelings. To achieve this, avoid telling them that they need to ‘be brave’ or saying that you know how they feel, instead really listen to them when they try to tell you about it. Gently summarising what they’ve told you back to them or asking if you don’t quite understand something they’ve said will show them that you’re interested and you really do want to understand what they are telling you. Reassure them that although those feelings are difficult, they are also a natural reaction to their loss; validating someone’s feelings can help them to work through them.

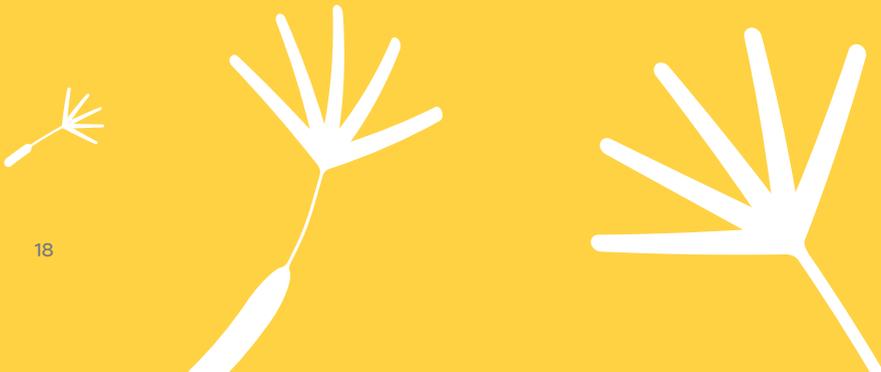
Be patient – As we’ve said previously, children may temporarily regress after a loss and go back to behaviours that they’d grown out of, such as tantrums, wanting to stay in your bed or bed wetting. They may also become more argumentative as a way of expressing the anger they feel about the loss. It can take great patience to deal with these changes in behaviour, particularly when you are dealing with your own grief at the same time, but kindness and gentility is what will help the child work through their feelings and the behaviours again. Making sure you are taking good care of yourself, eating well and getting adequate sleep if possible, as well as allowing yourself time to work through your own feelings will help you to be more patient and available for the child, this will help it feel a little easier to deal with the tricky days.

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Model healthy grief – The child will learn how to grieve by following your lead, whether you realise they are observing or not. It is important to set a healthy example, by not trying to hide your pain away. Acknowledge on bad days that you are sad, or angry or scared because you are missing that person, but it is ok to feel like that because it shows how much you loved them. If you won't talk about the person and your feelings, the child will learn that they shouldn't too and will bottle their feelings up instead.

Give them a chance to remember – Grief is about remembering, not forgetting, talking about the loved one easily and frequently will let the child know it's ok to do so, though respect there may be times that the child does not want to talk as well. Partake in remembrance activities such as creating a memory box for the loved one or creating a photo album of their favourite pictures to encourage them to think about the good times with that person. Very young children may not remember the person they have lost, so it may be helpful as they grow up to tell them a bit about the person that died, showing them pictures and explaining what they were like. Remember that it is possible to grieve for what they've never had; that relationship was still missing from their lives whether they remember the person dying or not.

If a special day such as Christmas, Mother's/Father's Day etc. is coming up, speak to the child about how they might like to mark the occasion and what they want to do to remember the person on that day.



Looking after yourself.

Whilst it may not be at the top of your 'to-do' list in the whirlwind after a loss, it is so, so important that you look after yourself during a time like this. Grief is exhausting, both emotionally and physically, which means you need to be taking good care of yourself in order to cope with it. You are the most valuable resource your child has in navigating their grief, in order to be able to take care of them, you need to take care of you.

Here are some tips for looking after yourself after a loss:

Get enough sleep – Sleep is incredibly important in helping us cope. After a loss it is common for people to find themselves either struggling to fall or stay asleep, or sleeping too much. If this is something that is affecting you, try setting yourself a sleep routine, going to bed and setting an alarm for the same time each day will get you used to designating that time to rest, even if you don't fall asleep at that time to start with. Try listening to some relaxing music or a sleep meditation to relax your mind into sleep. If you find that when trying to fall asleep, you are kept awake by persistent thoughts of things you need to do or remember, consider leaving a notepad and pen next to your bed so you can get the thoughts out of your head and on to paper.

Eat a balanced diet – Appetite is another thing that is commonly affected by grief, people tend to find that they either aren't hungry or are comfort eating. Whilst it may be difficult, try to make sure you are eating enough and that it's fairly balanced as this will help you keep the strength to process your feelings, as well as look after your child.



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Ask for help – Grief is full on and it's difficult, even more so when you're helping your child navigate it as well. Accept and ask for help when you need it, whether it's someone cooking a meal for you, helping you with some aspect of the funeral or looking after your child for a hour or so to give you chance to check in with yourself. There is no shame in accepting help, it does not mean you are not coping, it means you are strong enough to accept your limits in this incredibly difficult situation.

Get physical exercise – If you used to exercise before the loss, try and keep this up (though we acknowledge it may be more difficult if you are now the sole carer of your child). If you've never exercised before, check with your doctor before starting something new. It doesn't have to be strenuous, even a gentle walk in nature can help to lift your mood and release some 'feel good' chemicals, making you feel more able to cope.

Be aware of your new limitations – After a loss, concentration and memory are affected, as are energy levels on top of all the difficult emotions you are dealing with; it's no wonder that people tend to not function at the level they did before. Be aware of your new limitations and try not to push yourself too much, for your own safety and others.

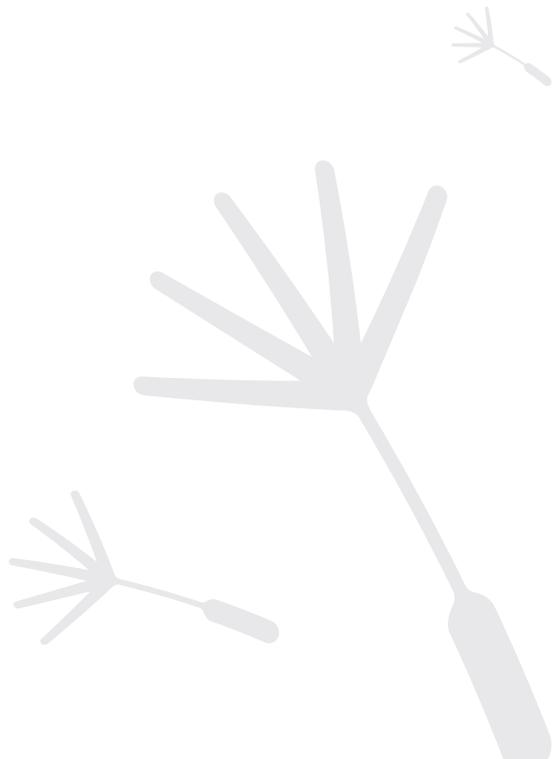
Try journaling – Journaling is a great way to get your thoughts and feelings out of your head and on to paper, it's non-judgemental, can help highlight themes in the way you are feeling (helping to work out your grief triggers) and highlight practical problems that need to be taken care of. There are many different types of journal and no right or wrong way to do it, just start writing and see where it takes you.

Reach out – There are many organisations that will offer free advice or counselling to bereaved people. If you feel like you need some extra help, ask for it.

Allow yourself to grieve – The kindest thing you can do for yourself is be accepting of feelings that arise and give yourself chance to process them.

End note.

Helping your child to navigate grief is a process, it is impossible to know how to handle each situation perfectly because each child will react very differently to loss, so there is no set guide. Be gentle with yourself and try not to feel guilty if you later feel a situation could have been handled differently, hindsight is a great thing and you will always do the best you can for you child, with the resources and knowledge you have available to you at that time. The very fact you have read this booklet shows that you are determined to support them in the best way that you can, and that in itself shows that you are doing a great job. There may be hard days with tantrums and tears, but there will also be good days with hugs and laughter, just keep going, one day at a time.





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