

# Bereavement & Loss Guidance for Parents & Carers

## Introduction

This document aims to explain how parents and carers can support children and young people who have experienced bereavement and loss. It outlines practical advice and signposts further sources of support. This document is accompanied by guidance for schools and settings on bereavement and loss.

## Bereavement in childhood

Child Bereavement UK indicate that one in 29 children aged five to sixteen has experienced the death of a parent or sibling; this equates to a child in every classroom. Many children will also experience other bereavements in childhood - be those of friends or relatives.

Children's responses to bereavement are unique and associated with many factors such as: the nature of their loss, be it sudden or anticipated; familial resources; the child's relationship with the deceased; the child's age and developmental stage; and proximity to the death.

When a parent dies, there is often acute stress within the family which has a marked impact upon child wellbeing (*Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020*). Whilst most children who experience bereavement go on to do well in life (*Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020*), research suggests that almost half of all bereaved children experience difficulties with daily functioning (*Pham et al., 2018*).

Each child and young person will respond to bereavement in their own way however research indicates that children can struggle with emotional responses, family functioning, friendships, academic attainment, engagement, and wellbeing.

## Understanding the ways children respond to death

Children and young people's responses to death can vary; some can show outward distress whilst others will hardly react at all. There may also be cases when children and young people do not know how to react, as they do not fully understand what has happened.

- The way in which children and young people respond to a death is related to their age and developmental stage. For children with special educational needs, it will be their functional level of understanding rather than their chronological age which will be most helpful in thinking about how they may understand the death and how to support them.
- Children and young people's responses to bereavement are also affected by the nature and emotional quality of the relationship they had with the individual who has died and the particular circumstances.
- The behaviour and attitude of those around them when dealing with the death also influences children and young people's ability to manage and process grief.

## Children and Young People's Responses

Below are some broad guidelines about how children may respond to death at different ages and stages. It is important to remember that all children develop in different ways and at their own pace.

Table 1. Bereavement responses at different ages and stages with suggestions for support

0-2 years	
Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infants are not able to understand about death but will experience the loss as a separation</li> <li>• They may become withdrawn with increased crying.</li> <li>• The emotional state of people around them can have an impact, so normality and routine are very important.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support soothing through regular physical contact. Being close to adults with heartbeat and motion (e.g. gentle rocking) can support calming.</li> <li>• Be as attuned as possible. Spend time looking at and talking to the infant, smiling as much as possible and being together 1:1.</li> <li>• Try to maintain the infant's former schedule - normality and routine are important in creating feelings of safety.</li> <li>• In order to provide effective support it is important that parents and carers ensure that they are also caring for themselves.</li> </ul>

## 2-5 years

Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children have a literal understanding of the language used to talk about death and this can lead to misunderstandings (e.g. passed away means someone is coming back).</li> <li>• Death is seen as reversible; there can be magical thinking e.g. if I do X then dad will come back.</li> <li>• Young children struggle to think about time concepts beyond the immediate present – this can make it hard for them to understand the permanence of death.</li> <li>• To make sense of their experiences, children may ask lots of questions, sometimes at inappropriate times (e.g. ‘When will X die?’).</li> <li>• Children may think that something they said or did caused the person to die.</li> <li>• Children are greatly affected by the sadness of family members; this can cause nightmares, sleeping and/or eating disturbances and aggressive or unusual play.</li> <li>• Young children may present as more attention needing and/or more withdrawn.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach words that describe feelings (e.g. ‘sad’ ‘worried’). Label their emotions for them by telling them that you know they are sad. Ensure that they have comfort items to hand.</li> <li>• Provide security by keeping to typical routines as much as possible and explaining who is looking after them.</li> <li>• Spend 1:1 time with them doing things they enjoy.</li> <li>• Use simple, concrete language (e.g. “When people die they do not talk, walk, breathe, eat, think, or feel any more”).</li> <li>• Be prepared to answer lots of questions.</li> <li>• Avoid non-literal terms like “passed over”, “went away”, “gone to sleep”, “or “resting”.</li> <li>• Encourage play as a means to explore loss and bereavement. Use stories to explain more abstract concepts.</li> </ul>

## 6-12 years

Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There can still be misunderstandings at this age, for example: thinking that the person who died may feel things such as sadness, hunger or cold.</li> <li>• There can be lots of questioning as children try to make sense of what has happened.</li> <li>• Children can feel worried about the safety of others and struggle to separate from caregivers (e.g. going to school).</li> <li>• Children want to see death as reversible but are beginning to understand it as final.</li> <li>• Children tend to understand the finality of death at 10-12 years.</li> <li>• They may not understand their own involuntary emotional response to the loss, which might include disturbing feelings of fear and guilt.</li> <li>• Behaviour may include immature reactions, outwardly difficult behaviour or new/increased fears</li> <li>• Trauma can be associated with racing thoughts or instructive thoughts. In response to this, children may appear distractable or forgetful.</li> <li>• Physical manifestations of emotional pain may also develop e.g. headaches or stomach aches.</li> <li>• Older children are noticing others' feelings and can worry about these. They may try to 'help out' or try very hard to please adults and not worry them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Label and notice emotions.</li> <li>• Allow comforting items or toys to go to into school,</li> <li>• Keep to typical routines and ensure that children know what to expect, when.</li> <li>• Use simple, concrete language to explain death as an when required (e.g. "When people die they do not talk, walk, breathe, eat, think, or feel any more").</li> <li>• Avoid non-literal terms like "passed over", "went away", "gone to sleep", "or "resting".</li> <li>• Be prepared to answer lots of questions and discuss misconceptions.</li> <li>• Encourage play as a means to explore loss and bereavement.</li> <li>• Use stories to explain more abstract concepts</li> <li>• Be prepared for 'puddle jumping' this is where children may move in and out of their grief. At some points they may appear very distressed and at others, they may play as if nothing has occurred.</li> </ul>

## 13-18 years

Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people at this age usually have an adult concept of death but their response and emotions may be heightened and very powerful.</li> <li>• Reactions may include anger, depression and non-compliance and the young person may be unsettled and more withdrawn and/or distractible.</li> <li>• Trauma is associated with difficulties with attention and focus so school work may be more difficult.</li> <li>• Teenagers may not want to go to school, finding it hard to separate or to face the school environment.</li> <li>• The loss may cause children to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings.</li> <li>• Hiding feelings might include use of jokes, humour or acting as if they do not care.</li> <li>• There can be an increase in risk-taking behaviour to provide escape or comfort.</li> <li>• Teenagers can want to turn towards their friends rather than family to seek support.</li> <li>• Loss can also feel very isolating for adolescents and they may feel a sense of loneliness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be honest and share information. Keep to typical routines and communicate these.</li> <li>• Talk with the child about what support would be helpful at school and communicate this to key school staff.</li> <li>• Acknowledge and label emotions. Provide time and space to discuss strong feelings if they wish to.</li> <li>• Talk to them about grief, what it is and that everyone feels differently.</li> <li>• Consider co-creating self-regulating strategies with them (e.g. writing, listening to music, talking to X, reading etc.)</li> </ul>

## What can help?

While every child and young person will respond differently, there are things which you can do to help them to understand what has happened, to process their feelings and emotions and, in time, move through the grieving process



## Support from schools and Settings

We know that co-ordinated support from home and school can be helpful to children and families experiencing bereavement. These are some of the things that might be helpful to discuss with your child's school:

- Establish a key point of contact to relay information and support communication
- Understanding who will be the key adult(s) supporting your child(ren).
- Arranging a return to school plan, including any timetable adjustments
- How your child can access support from school staff and what they might find helpful
- Communication to friends and the wider school community and support to keep in touch with friends
- Short and longer term support for any interruptions to learning
- Anything which is important to your family with regards to faith and culture and any significant family dates or events to be mindful of
- Funeral arrangements

## Sources of further Support

Below are the details of a variety of organisations that provide support and resources:

[Bereavement: Advice and information for parents](#) (Young Minds)

[Resources for children and young people \(Child Bereavement UK\)](#)

[Preparing a child for loss](#) (Winston's Wish)

## Childline

Telephone: 0800 1111

Website: [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)

A free and confidential, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in distress or danger. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn.

## Child Death Helpline

Telephone: 0800 282 986

Website: [childdeathhelpline.org.uk](http://childdeathhelpline.org.uk)

A free and confidential helpline available Monday to Friday 10am-1pm; Tuesday and Wednesday 1pm-4pm; every evening 7pm-10pm. The helpline provides support to anyone affected by the death of a child of any age from pre-birth to adult, and to promote understanding of the needs of bereaved families.

## Cruse Bereavement Care

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

Website: [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

A free helpline supporting anyone who has been bereaved by death, open Monday to Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), and 8pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. This service is confidential, offering a 1-1 service to clients in their own homes and promotes the wellbeing of bereaved people.

## Hope Again

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

Website: [hopeagain.org.uk](http://hopeagain.org.uk)

This youth bereavement service, run by Cruse, is free and confidential. It is available Monday to Friday, 9:30am - 5pm and is just for children and young people who have been affected by death. Support includes a helpline, website and peer support.

## Winston's Wish

Telephone: 08088 020 021

Website: [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)

A national helpline for anyone caring for a child coping with the serious illness or death of a family member. They are a leading childhood bereavement charity and the largest provider of services to bereaved children, young people and their families in the UK.

## Kooth

Website: [kooth.com](http://kooth.com)

Free, safe and anonymous online counselling support for young people aged between 10 and 25. Available Monday to Friday 12pm-10pm and Saturday to Sunday 6pm-10pm.

## Childhood Bereavement Network

Website: [childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Childhood Bereavement Network supports professionals working with bereaved children and young people with information updates, key resources and networking opportunities.

## Grief Encounter

Telephone: 0808 802 0111

Website: [griefencounter.org.uk](http://griefencounter.org.uk)

Email: [griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk](mailto:griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk)

Support for children and families who have been bereaved via phone, online chat and email. You can also take part in group activities with likeminded families at their fundays, grief groups and remembrance days. Phone lines are open Monday to Friday 9am-9pm.

## Compassionate Friends

Telephone: 0345 123 2304

Website: <https://www.tcf.org.uk/>

Email: [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk)

A nationwide support organisation for bereaved parents with a local branch – 53 North St,

Bristol, BS3 1EB.

## Samaritans

Telephone: 116 123

Website: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

A registered charity aimed at providing support to anyone in emotional distress, who is struggling to cope or at risk of suicide. They operate across the United Kingdom and Ireland and are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year by telephone, email or post.

## Young Minds Crisis Messenger

Text: Text YM to 85258

24-hour text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis; texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.

Anna Freud Centre Youth Wellbeing Directory

Website: [annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/](http://annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/)

A list of local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

## References

Dyregrov, A., Dyregrov, A., & Lytje, M. (2020) Loss in the family: A reflection on how schools can support their students. *Bereavement Care*, 39:3, 95-101, Doi: 10.1080/02682621.2020.1828722

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Worden, J. W. (2018). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. Fifth ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

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 [tradingwithschools@bristol.gov.uk](mailto:tradingwithschools@bristol.gov.uk)

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