

Childhood bereavement: A guide for school staff and families

This information is based on:

- Training in 'bereavement and loss' – Mark Hughes (Simon Says).
- Training in 'traumatic bereavement and suicide' – Liz Koole (Child Bereavement UK).
- Handouts from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service.

Statistics - YouGov Survey (Child Bereavement UK)

- 23,600 children under the age of 18 lose a parent each year.
- 4% of children under the age of 18 experience the death of a parent or sibling. This works out to 1 in 29 school children (around 1 child per class).
- 10,061 babies, children and young people (under the age of 25) died in the UK in 2016.
- Although not often spoken about, many children will be affected by bereavement at some point in some way or another, whether that is the loss of a family member or a pet.
- Feelings of grief and loss can also be triggered by other life events, such as moving house or schools, parental separation, breakups, or peer relationship breakdowns.
- Research also shows we can still experience a sense of loss/grief for those we have not met or do not remember e.g. unmet birth parents.

Responses

- Grief is a natural and normal response to a bereavement, but everyone deals with it differently. There is no set time frame.
- **Factors:** A child's reaction to death will be influenced by a number of factors, including their age, relationship with the person who has died, the nature of the death (e.g. whether a long-term illness, or more traumatic types of death such as suicide or if the child has witnessed the death), their previous life experiences of death, and their social environment.
- **Age:** Children develop more of an understanding of death as they grow older. Children under 2 years will have no cognitive concept of death, but instead experienced as a separation from someone they have an attachment to. At 2-5 years, children may believe death is temporary and reversible. They may also show 'magical thinking' (e.g. that they can bring the person back or that they caused the death). At 6-9 years, children start to develop a concept of finality, irreversibility, inevitability, and universality, and children may be very curious about death. At 9-13 years, death begins to be perceived at a more adult level. At adolescence, children may be more aware of their future and question the meaning of life.
- **Emotions:** Grief can include many complex feelings, including shock, denial, anger, guilt, shame, regret, rejection, abandonment, confusion, injustice, unfairness, exhaustion, powerlessness, numbness, yearning, longing, depression, fear, anxiety, isolation, devastation, emptiness, loneliness etc.
- Children may repress or internalise their feelings and emotions, which can lead to distressing nightmares and intrusive thoughts.
- It is important to note that positive feelings may also be experienced during the grief process e.g. gratitude, connection, community, belonging, determination, reflection, development of new relationships and friendships, a new sense of meaning and purpose, and relief if the person was in pain and/or suffering.
- Moods may switch between upset and joy/laughter very quickly. Some children may display behaviour that seems inappropriate to others, such as laughter, but this may be their way of coping or happen because they are still only learning how to express their emotions appropriately.
- **Behaviour:** Children may communicate their distress through their behaviour, or play and learning. Death can make people feel out of control so this may lead children to organise their behaviours protectively to gain a sense of control.

Impact

A child may be impacted in a number of ways/areas in their life at both school and home:

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- Emotional impacts, including on self-esteem, identity, anxiety, attachment/relationships etc (e.g. they may present with attention-needing/connection-seeking behaviours, or they may experience separation anxiety from key adults, due to worries that something might happen again).
- Academic impacts, such as on attention/concentration, memory, cognitive skills, motivation, attainment, attendance, homework, over-working/perfectionism etc.
- Social impacts, such as isolation, jealousy, friendship conflict/difficulties, sense of belonging etc.
- Physical impacts, such as on sleep (e.g. nightmares and tiredness), diet (e.g. losing their appetite), health/illness (e.g. where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort), role changes at home, risk-taking behaviours etc.

Theory

Psychological models can be helpful to describe the experiences of bereavement:

- Stages of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 1969): This suggests a progression of emotional states in grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, more recent research and understanding is that we move back-and-forth between these different emotions (it is not a predictable linear process that ends in acceptance).
- Growing around grief (Tonkin, 2006): This theory suggests that grief starts off as all-consuming. Although it does not disappear with time, we can grow our lives around it.
- Dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1995): This model illustrates the movement between loss-oriented (e.g. intrusion of grief, denial/avoidance of restoration, breaking bonds/ties etc) and restoration-oriented (e.g. attending to life changes, distraction, new roles/identities/relationships etc) activities, which are important for recovery.
- Continuing bonds (Silverman, Klass & Nickman, 1996): This suggests the bereaved remain psychologically and emotionally connected to the deceased and the relationship/bond continues. Bereavement is not about letting go, but reevaluating the meaning of loss.
- Meaning reconstruction and experience of loss (Neimeyer, 2001): This suggests that following a bereavement, we must relearn our place in the world, reconstruct our identity/sense of ourselves, discover new purpose and meaning in life, and re-order our sense of the world. We can do this in part through retelling our events/perceptions with a supportive person. This emphasises that grief can take over our emotions and thinking, but that there is no standard emotional response to grief.
- Disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989): This type of grief occurs when the bereavement is not acknowledged or recognised as a significant loss by society. This is more likely with deaths that may be more stigmatised e.g. due to alcohol or drug misuse, suicide, or AIDs.

Support

It is important to note that bereavement/grief cannot be 'fixed'. However, many children and young people will not require more specialist help/intervention, and can be supported through these challenges with time, love, patience and understanding. Support is often an ongoing process that will need reconsidering at different stages. The following ideas may be helpful in terms of providing support to children who have been bereaved:

- **B.E.R.E.A.V.E.M.E.N.T.** (Winston's Wish): Bereavement support, Express feelings and thoughts, Remember the person who has died, Education and information, Appropriate response from schools and colleges, Voice in important decisions, Enjoyment, Meet others, Establish routines, Not to blame, Tell the story.
- Acknowledgement: Let the child know you are aware of what has happened and you are there if they need to talk. Acknowledge that some days/times will be better than others.
- Reassurance: Children will need comfort and reassurance from people they are close to and know well (e.g. family members, and key peers and adults) e.g. that it is normal and okay to feel a range of emotions. The child may also need reassurance that it's okay for them to laugh and have fun with their friends, as they may feel guilty about doing this.

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- **Listen:** Be available to listen if the child wants to talk or even just to sit quietly with someone. Sometimes our natural responses are not to talk about it, because we are not sure what to say, are afraid of saying the wrong thing, assume they do not want to talk about it, do not want to be 'nosey', and/or are scared of upsetting them. However, this can deny and invalidate their feelings. Without asking many questions, just listening to the child without interruption can provide a great deal of comfort. Children may benefit from regular planned meetings with a key adult, who can provide time and space to talk/have open conversations. Children may want to explore, reflect, and question with someone they trust. Or they may not yet be ready, and that's okay too.
- **Safe space:** The child may want access to a safe quiet space to go to when feeling overwhelmed in school.
- **Emotion coaching:** Children may need to learn an awareness of their emotions, through empathetic listening, labelling/naming emotions, and validating their feelings (www.emotioncoachinguk.com). Adults may need to model the expression of feelings. If you feel upset about the death, do not be afraid to express that you are also sad. This helps children to understand that their own reactions are normal.
- **Information:** Children will have some awareness about what has happened, but if they are not spoken to about this, they can often imagine something far worse. Children will need accurate, factual and age-appropriate information to help them understand what has happened. If the child asks questions, try to answer these as best you can. For younger children, simple and concrete language is needed to avoid confusion (e.g. "I have something very sad to tell you, X has died" rather than more abstract language such as "passed away" or "lost"). It may be necessary for the child to be given small bits of information at a time so they have time to process what they have been told. The adult will then need to gage when they are ready to hear more. If necessary, be prepared to go over the same information several times, as the child tries to process the news.
- **Communication:** Use the method of communication that the child typically uses (e.g. children with language or learning needs may need information using visual supports).
- **Activities:** Activities can help the child explore their emotions and ideas about death. Some children will find it easier to express their feelings through non-verbal activities e.g. through art, play or music, or structured activities such as the 'road journey of grief', 'feelings in a person' template (see charity websites for resources/activity ideas). Externalising grief through visual supports e.g. a memory box/jar/stones, pictures, transitional objects etc can be helpful. Some children may benefit from creating a personal story about their specific experience.
- **Social support:** Children may need support to reconnect with their peers and develop key relationships e.g. buddy systems, support groups for bereaved siblings, which can be accessed through local charities.
- **Consistency:** Children benefit from routine, predictability, and consistency during challenging times. It can help the child to return to school when they are ready, as this will help restore their sense of safety, predictability, security, and normality.
- **School considerations:** Consider who to tell and how (it will be helpful to ensure all staff are aware of the child's circumstances with the child and family's consent). If the person who has died attends your school, letters home, assemblies, and a service/celebration of life will need consideration.
- **Learning:** Be mindful of sensitive lesson content/curriculum topics, extra time may be needed for learning tasks and homework, longer breaks may be needed etc.
- **Memorial activities:** Memorial activities may help children come to terms with the death, remember the deceased in a positive way, and speak openly about their feelings.
- **Funerals:** Funerals can be beneficial to understand what has happened, process grief, and mourn and celebrate a person's life. It is usually best if children are given the informed option of attending funerals. If they choose to go, they may need prior preparation for what they may see. A named person to support them will be needed during the funeral. They may also benefit from the opportunity to discuss the funeral afterwards.
- **Personal beliefs:** We all have different views of death and what happens to us after death depending on our beliefs. Therefore, it may be best not to give a personal viewpoint on this.
- **Future:** Be mindful that significant events/dates/anniversaries may be particularly challenging, so ensure these dates are recorded. Remembering the person who has died can help the healing process, so the child will benefit from future opportunities to talk about the person and share memories. Be aware that the child

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may be more emotionally vulnerable if they experience a subsequent loss/bereavement, which can trigger past experiences and feelings of grief. Also be aware of signs of delayed grief.

- **Staff support:** Staff may also benefit from reassurance, peer support, a reflective space to talk, a key person, supportive leadership, supervision, signposting, and promotion of individual self-care and a work/life balance.
- **Family support:** It will be helpful to signpost families for further support and strong home/school communication will be necessary.

Signposting

Charities/websites:

- [Winston's wish](#) This is a childhood bereavement charity. The website includes 'The charter for bereaved children', 'School information pack, positive responses to death: A strategy for schools', and 'Supporting a bereaved child or young person: A guide for parents and carers'. Helpline: 08088 020 021.
- [Child Bereavement UK](#). Helpline: 0800 02 888 40. Contains information specifically for schools e.g. sample letters/documents, guidance for parents, an outline for assembly, checklists etc.
- [Childhood Bereavement Network](#).
- [Simon Says](#).
- [Jigsaw South East](#).
- [Cruse Bereavement Care](#) and www.rd4u.org.uk. Helpline: 0808 808 1677. Cruse is a national charity that provides information, advice, and support to anyone who has been bereaved.
- [Compassionate Friends](#).
- [Elephant's Tea Party](#).
- [Sibs](#). For siblings of children with disabilities and long-term health conditions, who provide support around sibling bereavement in these circumstances.
- [UK trauma council](#): Traumatic bereavement resources.

Media:

Photos, TV programmes, documentaries, films, and books that cover the topic of death can be useful discussion tools and help children develop an understanding of death. Some books and videos include:

- Sunderland & Armstrong. Helping Children with Loss: A Guidebook.
- Varley. Badger's Parting Gifts (therapeutic story).
- Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone Has Died.
- Wilhelm (1985): I'll always love you.
- Lloyd (1997): The Charlie Barber Treatment.
- [Traumatic bereavement](#) – helping children and young people who are struggling in schools.

More specialist help

Most children will be able to be supported through their key adult relationships and friendships. In terms of more specialist support, research highlights that intervention given too soon can interrupt the natural grieving process. However, if there are continued concerns about the child's wellbeing, the following professionals can be referred to for further additional support:

- Your GP.
- Your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).
- Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) in schools, who have been trained in bereavement and loss, or learning mentors.
- Winston's Wish.
- Educational or Clinical Psychologists.

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