

Talking about and understanding death



Just like adults, children and young people grieve uniquely. The process of bereavement can bring a whirlwind of emotions, disrupt school, family life, and important routines for adults and children alike.

The nature of the relationship your child had with their loved one and how they died will all impact how your child will respond. The age of your child, their cognitive development, ability to verbalise and communicate their emotions, and the other things going on in their lives are just a few examples of other factors which can influence how they might grieve – you can see why every response is so unique.

According to psychologist J. William Worden, there are four tasks of mourning:

- Accepting the reality of the loss
- Acknowledging the pain of grief
- Adjusting to a world without our loved one
- Reinvesting in life and establishing an enduring connection as you move forward on your life journey

When a person grieves, these tasks are not completed one after the other but are approached more organically, by dipping in and out of each one at different points in time, perhaps even in the same day. Don't worry if your child appears to be going over the same ground in their grief, this is not uncommon. Let's look at each one in more detail.

Accepting the reality of the loss

This can be difficult for children, especially if the death was sudden or it is their first experience of bereavement. It relies on them being able to understand death and this in turn relies on them having a good grasp of time. Younger children can struggle with understanding both what death is and the fact that it is a permanent state. Don't worry if your child continues to talk about their loved one as if they are still alive, it may take time for them to grasp this and you may find yourself repeating the same explanation often, which can be painful for you.

How to help:

- Taking a scientific approach to death can be helpful and this can be adapted to suit differing ages. This allows children to understand death as a part of life and to begin to normalise their experience.
- Noticing dead birds and other animals and how they have stopped breathing and moving can be a starting point. For older children this can be developed by talking about how the animal's heart has stopped beating.
- It can also be helpful to notice the seasons whilst on a walk or in the garden and talk about how all living things have a life cycle.
- Children can interpret information in a very literal way, for this reason it is not advisable to use terms like "lost", "gone away", "gone to sleep" or "passed away". This can lead to confusion and may influence their feelings around the burial or cremation.
- Instead, remembering the scientific approach, use the terms dead, died, death, dying as factually accurate descriptions.
- Following a bereavement, it is important for us all to try and make sense of what has happened. Whilst the death brings associated pain and sadness, increasing a child's understanding of what death is can help them to feel more secure in the knowledge of what has happened to their loved one.
- Use clear, age-appropriate language and remember that children will often fill in the gaps if they don't have the facts.

- It is sometimes the case that children's stories about what happened to their loved one do not always make sense, perhaps because they have connected seemingly unrelated events or facts. Helping them develop a more accurate age-appropriate narrative around the events leading up to the death can help them to accept the reality of the loss.
- Remember that accepting the reality of the loss is likely to be a process facilitated by ongoing conversations around the death of the child's loved one.

Adjusting to the pain of grief

Following a bereavement, we experience a range of emotions and these fluctuate in intensity throughout the day. In any grieving family, the different members might be feeling very different emotions at the same time and this can lead to clashes and relationship difficulties. For children they might be experiencing both feelings and a level of intensity of emotions that they have not encountered before. They may not have the vocabulary to express their feelings so may act them out through their behaviour.

Children need 'time off' from the intensity of these emotions and often move in and out of them more rapidly than adults. You might observe this process, often called 'puddle jumping'. For example, your child might be in floods of tears one minute and asking whether they can go out to play or what's for tea the next. Adults tend to be able to tolerate greater amounts of distress and so can find the sudden shift in a grieving child surprising at first.

How to help:

- Help your child to name the emotions they are experiencing, for example, "I can see that you are feeling angry"; "It sounds like you are feeling more worried since X died."
- Strong emotions can lead to a feeling of being out of control or overwhelmed. Where possible maintain the usual boundaries and expectations around behaviour and routines to help your child manage these feelings.

- Appreciate that your child may be feeling more tired than normal because of their rapidly changing emotions.
- Help your child to find healthy ways both to express their emotions and to begin to regulate them, for example through talking, physical exercise, breathing techniques or creative means such as drawing and writing. Talking to your child about how you do this and modelling it can also be helpful.
- Don't be worried about getting upset in front of your child, it is helpful for them to see this and to see you recover your composure.
- Find ways to talk about your experiences of grief within the family. This can be as simple as saying, "I'm feeling sad since X died"; or "I'm not sleeping as well since X died."
- It can be more helpful to think of this time as 'learning to live alongside your grief' rather than trying to 'get over it'.

Adjusting to a world without our loved one

When we are bereaved, we lose not only our relationship with our loved one but also the functions that person performed in our lives. Children who lose a parent may also lose the person who put them to bed or made their packed lunch. Those that lose a grandparent may lose the person who picked them up from school or taught them to bake.

Don't worry if your child seems more concerned with the fact that these roles are now missing for them rather than in the loss of the person themselves. Lack of clarity around who will now fulfil these roles can cause uncertainty which may lead to a child feeling unsafe. Also, for some children this concern might be a more tangible expression of the pain they are feeling.

In addition, children who lose a significant relationship may become fearful of losing another and so worry about the health of other friends and relatives or perhaps seem more anxious about being apart from you.

How to help:

- Discuss with your child who will now fulfil the roles their loved one provided
- Where possible stick to normal routines
- Provide information about where you are going and what time you will be back and endeavour to stick to this
- Listen to your child's fears and allow them to express these without minimising them
- Explain to your child that these worries are 'normal' for someone who has been bereaved
- Offer cuddles, hugs and lots of reassurance
- Talk about their loved one in everyday conversation, even if your child finds this too difficult at first
- Help your child to capture memories of their loved one through photographs, special items, stories of other family members and their own recollections. They may wish to create a memory box, photo album or to write or draw special memories.

Reinvesting in life and establishing an enduring connection as you move forward on your life journey

Initially your child may appear to withdraw from normal life and not want to do the things they once did. Change and loss can lead to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity, which can affect trust, self-esteem, confidence and a child's sense of safety.

However, over time as they adjust to their bereavement and find ways of living alongside their grief, your child will begin to establish new patterns of relating and begin to re-invest in other parts of their life.

How to help:

- Reassure your child that moving forward doesn't mean forgetting. Continue to talk about their loved one in everyday conversation.
- Offer ways of continuing a bond with their loved one through everyday activities or by creating a ritual that helps to remember them and honours the relationship your child had with them. This could be things like visiting the grave or continuing to do something they used to do together. It might also be baking the cake their loved one always made or watching their favourite film. Some of these things might feel too painful at first but over time it is likely your child will find something meaningful they can both tolerate and appreciate.
- Support your child to return to any activities they used to enjoy or to try something new if they prefer. They may need more reassurance, a friend or family member to go with them or to start by going for shorter periods of time.
- Remind your child it is ok to feel happy sometimes, this does not mean they have forgotten their loved one.

Further support

This leaflet is written to support our two primary publications in the Little Gem series:

- Supporting a child when someone they love has died / Someone I love has died
- Someone significant has died – handling grief as a young person

Our other specialist leaflets include:

- Funerals and cremations
- Supporting a child bereaved by murder
- Supporting a child bereaved by suicide
- Telling a child a friend has died
- Building resilience following a bereavement
- Viewing a body with a child

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