

# Information and resources for helping to cope with bereavement and loss

Most grieving children do not need a 'bereavement expert' they need people who care. Child Bereavement UK explain that, just by carrying on with their usual day-to-day activities while being aware of the bereavement, schools can do a huge amount to support a grieving pupil.

The following videos and resources provide support and guidance for those who have been affected by loss and bereavement, and for those supporting them.

If you have experienced the loss of a pupil or member of staff in your school, please complete the Notification Form on the Schools Infolink.

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**Please note:** Essex County Council does not manage the content nor does it own these resources. It does not hold clinical risk for those using them. Please check the suitability of the resources based on your knowledge of the individual.

## The Grief Cycle

People who are grieving do not necessarily go through the stages in the same order or experience all of them.



## Feelings and emotions of grief

Grief is a normal, essential response to the death of a loved one, and can be short lived or last a lifetime depending on the personality involved, the closeness of the relationship, the circumstances of the death and previous losses suffered.

### Shock and Disbelief

This happens when the model of our world is upset. One not only loses the person, but life can feel as though it has no meaning. Shock can take the form of physical pain or numbness, but more often consists of complete apathy or withdrawal or abnormal calm, in some cases anger. Numbness can act as a defence, so we are able to cope with immediate jobs and needs. A child's reaction may range from silent withdrawal to a wild outburst of screaming. Often young children are unable to understand what is going on, but they are sensitive to a disturbed and sad atmosphere and of the disruption of all that is usually familiar to them

## Denial

This generally occurs within the first fourteen days and can last minutes, hours or weeks; behaving as though the dead person is still there, no loss is acknowledged. For example a husband may make arrangements for he and his wife to go somewhere together. Young children may talk in terms of the dead person returning for significant events e.g. "I expect Mummy will come back when it's my birthday."

## Growing Awareness

Many at this stage feel abnormal because they have never before experienced the waves of savage feelings that surge through them and over which they temporarily have no control such as tears, anger, guilt, sadness and loneliness. Some or all of the following emotions may be experienced:

- A. Yearning and pining - the urge to search, go over the death, trying to find a reason for the death, visiting where it happened. For children this is probably the most logical part of their grieving. They have lost something, so they set out to find it. The fact that they never do may build up into tremendous anguish and fear of losing other people.
- B. Anger against any or all of the following: the medical services, the person who caused the death, in case of accident, God for letting it happen, the deceased for leaving them. Even very small children can feel anger towards a parent who has 'left'. Real fury may show itself not in words but in fits of temper. In adolescents the anger may be shown in different ways such as lying or stealing.
- C. Depression – the bereaved person begins to feel despair, the emptiness, the pain of the loss. It is often felt alongside feelings of redundancy, lack of self-worth, and no point to anything. If the person can cry, it usually helps to relieve the stress.
- D. Guilt – this emotion is felt for the real or imagined feelings of negligence or harm inflicted on the person who has just died. People might say "if only I'd called the Doctor / not gone out" etc. Children may dwell on things they think could have done to prevent the death. There is the tendency to idolise the person who died and feel that they should have loved them better. The bereaved can also be guilty about the feelings of the person who died and their inability to enjoy life.
- E. Anxiety – in extreme cases anxiety can become panic, as the full realisation of the loss begins to come through. There are anxieties about changes taking place and new responsibilities and the loneliness looming ahead. There may even be thoughts of suicide. There may be practical anxieties, adolescents for example may worry about who will pay pocket money, pay University fees, take them on holiday etc.

## How you can help with emotions and feelings of grief

When someone dies the natural order of things is upturned. The following advice forms a set of principles for responding to an individual who has suffered loss through bereavement.

- DO let your genuine concern and caring show
- DO say you are sorry about what happened and their pain
- DO allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share
- DO encourage them to be patient with themselves, not to expect too much of themselves and not to impose any 'should' on themselves
- DO talk about the special endearing qualities of the person they have lost
- DON'T let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out to a bereaved person.
- DON'T avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided by friends adds pain to an already intolerable painful experience).
- DON'T change the subject when they mention the person's name or avoid mentioning the person's name out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they have not forgotten it).

## How to talk to children and young people about bereavement

- **Be honest** - Children need to know what happened to the person that died. Try to explain in clear, simple language that's right for their age and level of experience. You might also try giving them information in small amounts at a time, especially to young children, as this can help them understand. Once you've explained that someone has died, the details can follow.
- **Use plain language** - It is clearer to say someone has died than to use euphemisms. Avoid explanations such as the person has 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away'. They may make the child frightened to go to sleep or worry when you leave the house you might not come back.
- **Encourage questions** - Be prepared for a child to be curious and to ask the same questions again and again. This can be distressing but remember it's a part of their need for reassurance and helps them process the information.
- **Reassure them** - It's common for children to feel that the person has died as a result of something they may have said or done. Explain simply how and why they're not to blame. It might be helpful to give an example, like saying the person died because their heart

stopped working. Reassure them that nothing that anyone said or did caused this to happen.

- **Ask them to tell their story** - To protect children, adults sometimes try to avoid talking about the person who's died. But the child may want to talk about the person. They need to tell their story and it might help them remember the person who's died. They had a relationship with the person who died and it was important to them.

Listening to them can help you understand what they know about what happened. You can also correct anything that's not quite accurate. Listening will also help you understand how the child's feeling. Avoid telling them what you think they should feel. Let them know that the feelings they may be having are OK, including ones that they may feel bad about, such as relief that the person has died.

*Reference: Marie Curie*

For more information, follow this link: <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/supporting-grieving-child/talking-to-children-about-death>

## Children and young people's reactions to death

### REGRESSIONAL BEHAVIOUR

Some children and young people may seem to change their personality in several different ways. These include:

- Isolating themselves and want to be alone
- Becoming 'grown-up', mature and overly serious
- Beginning to feel that 'life isn't worth it' and there is 'no point in thinking about the future'
- Retreating into a fantasy world and withdrawing from adults and friends

**SCHOOL PROBLEMS** - Many children and young people begin to have temporary problems with their school work. It is common to have difficulty concentrating on what teachers say, or on the work in hand. They may find school work unimportant, or begin to show behaviour problems, or in keeping friends in class. As behaviour changes, other children and young people may find it difficult to understand why their friend is behaving differently.

### What might help Teachers/Form Tutors if a student has died:

- Consider talking with the class about decisions regarding the place where the student sat and to acknowledge when it feels ok to move things around or for others to use the chair.
- Acknowledge no longer calling out their name in the register
- Be flexible with initial lessons soon after the event has occurred – some students will feel ok to continue with usual lessons and structure can be very helpful. Other students will appreciate space and time to talk about the student who has died and their memories of them or the last times they saw or spoke with them.

## How the school can help

### SUPPORTING THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

- Recognise the need for the whole school community to have clear, concise and up to date information at all stages, taking into account the needs and feelings of those directly involved
- Recognise the need for formal grieving, rituals and commemoration
- Recognise the needs of staff for support as well as pupils
- Encourage all the continuation of normal activities while remaining sensitive to individual needs
- Respect difference in terms of culture, religious beliefs etc.
- Reassure pupils of the acceptability of their feelings and that there is no 'right' way of grieving and reacting to loss

Schools facing a traumatic incident should already have the School Incident Management Plan in place, written perhaps with support from the School Service and with reference to the Schools Incident Management Plan – Essex LA Guidance for schools.

Betinna Devou and Marie-Ange Widershoven-Zervikis '*Effects of Mourning on cognitive processes*' in Educational and Child Psychology vol. 21, No. 3, 2004. BPS

Adam Abedelnoor and Sheila Hollins '*How children cope at school after family bereavement*' in Educational and Child Psychology Vol. 21, No 3, 2004. BPS

Information Sheet on The Needs of Bereaved Children – see Appendix 1 below.

## RESOURCES

### Resources for children (EYFS & primary phase)

- **The Small Creature**, an animated story to help bereaved children by the British Heart Foundation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks2DOoZtZ4A>  
When young children lose someone close to them, it can be so difficult to tell how they are dealing with that loss, and help them through any feelings they might be having. This is where Small Creature can help. He loses his best friend, Bird, and finds himself experiencing all sorts of feelings as he tries to deal with her loss. The friends he encounters along the way give him little ways to deal with those feelings and let him know that help is at hand.
- **Howard B. Wigglebottom Listens to a Friend**, video for children & their friends <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdYCsxC8EHY>  
This video helps young children be better listeners, learn important life lessons and feel good about themselves. It is about being a good friend when someone we know experiences loss.
- **The Invisible String**, book read aloud. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cO2LBBBtAI>  
A bestseller that has helped countless readers of all ages across the world cope with separation anxiety, loss, loneliness and grief.
- **The Dragonfly Story**, book read aloud. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFrOMCdZynY>  
This story is an adaptation of the fable of the transformation of the dragonfly. This fable has been long used to explain death and the hope of heaven. Using the experience of the death of her eldest child, the author, Kelly Owen, has retold the fable in simple terms to encourage children and families to talk about death and what happens when we die. The book does not shy away from the subject of death but aims to explain it in a real and loving way. The story starts in the family home as the siblings feel sad and confused about their sister's death, so the parents take them to the park where they discover a dragonfly. The fable of the dragonfly is then told, and they reflect on how that might explain their loss. The book is ideal for people of all beliefs and none. The Dragonfly Story offers hope and comfort to the bereaved.



## Resources for young people (secondary phase+)

- **The Grieving Process: Coping with Death**, video.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsYL4PC0hyk>  
 There is no right or wrong way to deal with the loss of a loved one. The grieving process is rough—and it's different for everyone. It's not just a matter of coping with a loss, but coping with change—and that takes time. This video deals with a very difficult subject. How do you deal with the death of a loved one? How do you live your life in the face of a life-changing event? We don't have all the answers. Honestly, you'll need to work through your through the stages of grieving in a way that works for you. But we do have some advice to help you heal.
- **Hope Again**, website for young people.  
<https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/> Hope Again is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. It is a safe place where you can learn from other young people, how to cope with grief, and feel less alone. Here you will find information about our services, a listening ear from other young people and advice for any young person dealing with the loss of a loved one. Hope Again provides somewhere to turn to when someone dies. Get involved and join the conversation.
- **Help 2 Make Sense**, website for young people.  
<https://help2makesense.org/>  
 Help 2 Make Sense is an online tool brought to you by Winston's Wish. It aims to help young people who have experienced the death of a loved one come to terms with their loss.

## Resources for all adults supporting children/young people

- **Winston's Wish: Supporting a bereaved child**  
<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/>
- **Cruse Bereavement Support**  
[Home - Cruse Bereavement Support](#)

## Resources for parent/carers

- **Cruse Bereavement Care**, website with advice, guidance and support.  
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents>  
 In these pages we have information on; what you can do to help a child or young person who is grieving; how to understand the concept of loss in children and young people of different ages and; how to recognise potential complicated grief.  
 Helpline: 0808 808 1677, open Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when we're open until 8pm.  
 Email: [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk)
- **Mind Ed for Families**, advice relating to death and loss.  
[https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/Content/death\\_and\\_loss\\_including\\_pets/#/id/59e0fc81ab5c1b176f1e29a0](https://mindedforfamilies.org.uk/Content/death_and_loss_including_pets/#/id/59e0fc81ab5c1b176f1e29a0)

## Resources for schools

- **Cruse Bereavement Care**  
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-schools>  
 These pages are for personnel working in schools and colleges, particularly headteachers, pastoral staff, tutors and other members of senior management teams. Cruse also have extensive information on children, young people and bereavement. A Schools Pack is available from their online shop.
- **Child Bereavement UK**, website for Primary schools.  
<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/primary-schools>  
 Information for teachers, teaching assistants, learning support assistants, headteachers, education welfare officers and other adults working in schools
- **Mentally Healthy Schools** by Heads Together  
<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/bereavement-and-loss/> An important foundation for helping children deal with and bounce back from adversity is the development of social and emotional skills. Many universal and targeted school-based programmes are proven to help children adjust and develop resilience. This website offers top tips and advice for supporting pupils in school.
- **The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools** by Ian Gilbert, Oliver Gilbert and William Gilbert 2010 ISBN 1845904648 See Appendix 2 below for a summary

## Appendices

### Appendix 1 The Needs of Bereaved Children

The following notes draw heavily on the work of **William Worden** as well as our own experience of working with bereaved children. In *“Children and Grief”*, (Guilford Press, New York, 1996) Worden summarises the findings of the two year long Harvard bereavement study, which charted the impact of the death of a parent on children. Worden states that children have ten needs.

#### 1. Adequate information.

Children need clear information, given in age-appropriate language, for instance, “He’s died”, rather than phrases such as “We’ve lost him”. It is important to give enough information without overwhelming a child. Sometimes the honest answer to a child’s question may be “I don’t know”, or “I can’t tell you just now”. Sometimes with traumatic death (e.g. suicide or murder) it may help to provide information in stages over weeks, months or even years. Giving simple facts at first (e.g. “Daddy died last night”), can be followed with more information later, perhaps prompted by the child’s questions.

Some key aspects of death may need to be repeatedly explained to younger children. It is important that they are helped to understand about the physical reality of death, that it is an irreversible transition from one state to another, and that people who are dead feel no cold, hunger or pain.

Some families have spiritual or religious beliefs about death. If talking about these matters, it is helpful to separate out what happens to someone’s body and their soul or spirit. It is important to respect the child’s and family’s views.

If at all possible, it is helpful for children to be given some preparation if someone close to them has a terminal illness.

#### 2. Fears and anxieties addressed.

It is a natural reaction to feel frightened following a death. Children may particularly fear that a surviving parent (or carer) will die or that they may die themselves.

Sometimes lack of understanding about a particular death, or death in general, may exacerbate fears. Fears are often worst at night, especially at bedtime or at other times of separation (e.g. going to school, staying at someone else’s house). Giving the child something to look after, or something to look forward to, helps them to understand that the separation will be short.

It is important to reassure wherever possible, but equally it is important to be truthful.

For example, a bereaved child who asks a surviving parent, “Will you die?” will not easily accept a statement which offers false certainty, such as, “No, of course not.” This child already knows that parents can die, maybe in sudden and shocking ways.

However, a suggestion that the surviving parent will probably live a long time (“Look at Grandma, she is 87!”) and sharing plans about who would care for them in the unlikely event of early death can be reassuring.

Clear accurate information helps to reduce fears - for example, talking about dad dying from a brain tumour and explaining how this is different to feeling poorly and having a headache.

### 3. Reassurance they are not to blame

Young children are still learning the difference between things that they caused to happen and things that had nothing to do with them. For example they naturally experience extremes of emotion and may connect an earlier angry tantrum with someone's death. It may be necessary to give them clear, repeated messages that they are not to blame.

### 4. Careful listening and watching

We all show our thoughts and feelings in many ways, not just by what we say. Children may express their feelings through their play, behaviour and the way they relate to others. Maybe they do not do things they always used to enjoy, or it seems very important to do something that Daddy did. Children may go very quiet at a particular time, or make a big fuss about something that might appear insignificant.

Sometimes it can be helpful to find out what is behind a question. For instance, if a child asked: "What happened to Sharon when she died?" it might be worth saying: "I wonder what you think?". The child's answer to this question may reveal more precisely what he wanted to know as well as helping him to find his own answers. This question might be about what caused her death, the physical changes in the body following her death, a spiritual question about her soul or something else entirely.

### 5. Validation of Individuals' feelings

The Harvard bereavement study found that 2 years after death one quarter of the children had been admonished for not showing enough feeling, whereas another quarter were told they should have finished grieving. This latter group included children who reported high levels of crying into the second year (Worden).

Allow for individual differences both in feelings and in the expression of feelings. There is not one way to grieve; in fact there are as many ways to grieve as there are people

It is important to let a bereaved adult or child know that the death, however painful, is something they can talk about. However, it is not helpful to make comments like: "I know how you feel", "You've got to be brave", "You should try and forget it", or "At least you've got another sister". These all have the effect of stopping any real conversation about what has happened, and denying the reality of the loss.

Sometimes validating a feeling, especially feelings of despair or deep pain, helps us to move through those feelings, at least temporarily. When we believe it is not OK to feel something our feelings can get locked away inside us. This can make them harder to deal with and may lead to difficulties in later life.

### 6. Help with overwhelming feelings

We all sometimes need to protect ourselves from difficult or painful feelings. Sometimes young children want to pretend that something awful has not happened, or at least forget about it for a while. It is important to respect this need at the same time as providing an environment that encourages confidence in our natural capacity to deal with difficult emotions.

Sometimes children will feel very angry, destructive, anxious, or withdrawn. Carers need to balance children's need for consistent boundaries and expectations

about their behaviour, with an acceptance that they may be less capable than you would ordinarily expect from a child of their age. For instance they may temporarily go backwards with potty training or dressing themselves.

Being alongside a child in play or other activity may provide opportunities to help them express their feelings. For example, “Teddy’s feeling really angry because his mummy’s died and he can’t see her again.”

## **7. Involvement and inclusion.**

It is important to involve children in acknowledging and commemorating a death. This may include visiting a sick person before death, seeing the body after death, their involvement in the funeral and their opinions about memorials. Seeing how the death affects their family and friends will help children to feel less alone.

Even where families have clearly defined choices or traditions around death, a child may still be able to contribute something to a funeral or memorial.

## **8. Continued Routine Activities**

Children benefit from being able to continue routine, previously enjoyed activities and interests. It is sometimes hard for adults to see children wanting to carry on with things so soon after a death. It is natural for children to dip in and out of grief, and just as adults need to carry on with the normal routines of daily life (making meals, cleaning the house etc.), so children need to play. Play may naturally include re-enactment of events surrounding the death or illness.

It is especially important following traumatic loss to provide as much stability and continuity as possible. The death of someone close is often very frightening. The child needs familiar activities and people to help them realise that, though life will never be the same, there are still many things that remain constant.

## **9. Modelled grief behaviours**

“Children learn how to mourn by observing mourning behaviour in adults.”  
(Worden p. 145).

Through sharing our own experience we can provide repeated opportunities for a child to make sense of and share their own feelings. It is important to be true to ourselves and open about our own feelings, but we must also be sensitive to a child’s needs when talking to them.

There may be information that it is not appropriate for a child to know at this time.

Adults can promote an environment where it is easy to talk about the deceased and to acknowledge good and bad memories.

When talking about such things it is natural to feel sad. It is also important to acknowledge anger, guilt and fear, but to do this in a way that does not overwhelm the child.

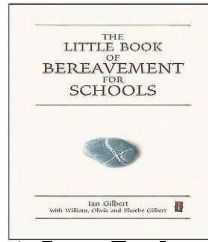
## **10. Opportunities to remember.**

When someone who played a significant part in a child’s life dies there will be countless moments when the child is reminded of their absence. When a family is able to speak about the deceased naturally, it helps a child to make sense of their own reality. At the same time it is important to respect that any individual may sometimes need to protect themselves from pain, and there may be times when a child does not want to talk about the deceased.

Sometimes when significant events are coming up, like anniversaries, Christmas, or other festivals, it is useful to plan in advance how the day will be spent. Families have found it helpful to do something in memory of the deceased at the beginning of special days, for example, looking at photos (or other items which have significance) and talking about the person who has died. Such times can also be a good opportunity to remind children that it is OK to have fun, perhaps by saying something like: “I’m sure Mummy would want you to enjoy today as much as possible, though we are bound to feel sad when we are missing her.”

Very young children who never met their deceased parent or sibling may not feel the need to ask questions about them – but older ones will. And as teenagers develop their own identity, it is helpful for them to have a sense of where they come from. It is much less painful for children to grow up with this knowledge than for them suddenly to find out later on.

Sacha Richardson, the Laura Centre, Leicester.  
Rose Griffiths, University of Leicester School of Education.



## **The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools – a summary. By Ian Gilbert (with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert)**

- **Most important response to a bereaved child is attending to what they say or they indicate (through their behaviour) as to how they are living with that death and what helps them.**
1. As soon as the death is known to the school have a senior member of staff talk to the immediate classmates about what has happened and offer support for those who may be affected.
    - Ignorance is a vacuum that gossip quickly fills.
  2. Send a condolence card and encourage classmates to do the same.
    - Saying 'I didn't know what to do' and doing nothing is a form of moral cowardice. No-one else knows what to do either.
  3. When the child comes back to school talk to them (but don't patronise them). Ask them how they would like their teachers to act.
    - Possible strategy could be to deflect your sympathy towards another family member.
    - Be aware that grief is like standing on a beach and being hit by waves. You don't know when they are going to hit but you know they will and there is nothing you can do to stop it.
    - Make sure all teaching and non-teaching staff are keeping a discreet and caring watch over the child.
  4. Teach other children to know what to say and how to handle things.
    - Culturally we treat death like Belgium. We know it's not far away but no-one wants to talk about it let alone go there.
    - The more you can talk about dying with the children, before a real-life death takes place in your school the better (in Gilbert's view).
    - Don't let them think if the grieving child is laughing then they have forgotten. Or if they are crying they should be given a tissue to make them stop.
  1. School can be a place to escape from what is going on at home.
    - But one size won't fit all.
    - Ask the child and liaise with the parent about the preferred strategy of the child.
  2. Grieving is mentally and physically exhausting.
    - At home talking about what has happened and how everyone is feeling is no respecter of bedtimes.
  3. Be tolerant of homework and other work commitments.
    - Be firm but caring as you try to ensure they don't get too far behind.
  8. Talk to the spouse if they come to the school.
    - Be mindful of the enormous effort the parent is making and the strain they are under.



- However hard it is for you it is so much harder for them.
9. Keep on talking to the child and letting them know you still remember, even in small ways.
    - Adults grieve in rivers where they are fully immersed in their grief for an extended period of time following a death. Little children grieve in puddles.
    - The bereaved person never forgets about the person they are missing and the fact that you mention them by name means that person is still, in some way, alive.
  
  9. Remember the anniversaries.
    - Make a note of date/s.
    - Filling in a 'holiday form'.
    - Transitions to other schools.
  
  10. Be aware of areas you may cover in the curriculum that may bring back memories.
    - Mother's Day, Father's Day, life after death in RE, areas that touch on illness.
    - Give the child a warning. Give them the choice.
  
  12. Be mindful of other children who have lost a loved one as it will bring back many memories.
    - 24000 children a year have to come to terms with losing a parent; 3000 YP a year die from accidents or illness; 6000 families a year affected by suicide. Sooner or later, probably sooner, the issue will arise in a school.
    - Consider having a quiet, discreet word with the child who has previously lost a loved one, to see how they're doing too.
  
  13. Learn about helping children to cope with bereavement from the various agencies out there.
    - Local hospices, church groups, Yoyo project
    - Larger organisations: Winston's Wish, Cruse, Child Bereavement UK.
  
  14. Time heals in bereavement as much as it does following an amputation.
    - But healing implies getting better, going back to how it was, being as good as before.
    - In bereavement, life gets better, not because of the absence of the pain, but because you learn to live your life despite it.
    - Grieving can be like a 'pebble in your pocket' (always there, uncomfortable at times, sticks into you when you least expect it, but at times you can get it out and hold it and deal with it, then put it back in your pocket till next time, and get on with your life).
    - If you're worried about not talking to someone about their loss for fear of upsetting them, don't worry. They're upset anyway, just hiding it. And talking to them can help.
  
  15. You can make a terrible situation a bit less stressful for a grieving family.
    - Nothing can take away the pain of the loss the children are dealing with. But actions from school staff – small ones, whole-school ones, genuine ones, professional ones, personal ones – can make an awful scenario just a little bit easier to deal with.

**This summary was of The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools, Ian Gilbert, 2010. (Independent Thinking Series), Crown House Publishing.**