

# Bereavement support from Bridgend Educational Psychology Service

## Supporting Bereaved Children and Young People

### Introduction

Every person's experience of grief is unique. When someone close to us dies, we may initially feel shocked, numb, guilty, angry, afraid and full of pain. These feelings may change to feelings of longing, sadness and loneliness – even hopelessness and fear about the future. These feelings are not unnatural, or wrong. These feelings are all 'normal' reactions to an incredibly difficult experience.

Children grieve from an early age, but not in the same way as adults. Children often grieve in bursts and can show their feelings in their behaviour and play. The effects of death can continue to be present for months or years after the event and children may need to revisit their grief at different stages of their development. This is because different life events may re-awaken the sense of loss. The support children receive will help them learn how to manage and deal with losses they will experience throughout their lives.



This pack has been designed to offer general advice about supporting bereaved children and young people. This advice is for families and for those who work with children and young people. This advice covers:

- Children and young people's understanding of death
- The process of grief
- Emotional, physical and behavioural reactions to bereavement
- The importance of looking after yourself as well as looking after a bereaved child or young person
- How to support Children and Young People
- Referring on to specialist services



Throughout this pack there are signposts highlighting where more advice and information can be found for certain things. They also signpost helpful resources and support from specialist organisations. Press the **Ctrl** button on your keyboard while clicking on the link to take you to the information.

## Children's understanding of death

### Preschool children

- Children don't understand that death is forever
- Children may be more clingy and needy and have trouble separating from key adults

### Early primary school

- Children are beginning to learn that death is permanent
- Children may be very matter-of-fact in the way they talk about death
- Children may want lots of information and may need to hear what has happened on a frequent basis
- Children may not be able to identify or express their feelings, these may be shown in their behaviour and in their play



For more information about explaining death to younger children and the importance of language, see pages 7-9 of the following guidance:

[https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement\\_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf](https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf)

### Later primary school

- Children in the later years of primary school understand that death is permanent
- Children might have strong views about what has happened and they may be interested in life after death and ask questions about it
- Children are more able to understand what other people are going through and the impact of the loss they have experienced as they get older



Winston's Wish was established in 1992 as the UK's first child bereavement charity, and currently supports around 30,000 children and young people per year.

<https://www.winstonswish.org>

Phone: 08088 020 021

Email: [info@winstonswish.org](mailto:info@winstonswish.org)

### Adolescents

- Adolescents grieve in much the same way as adults
- Adolescents often experience emotional 'ups and downs' and can become deeply distressed
- Adolescents may express grief and sadness through acting out and angry behaviour that covers up their underlying feelings
- Often, teenagers are more likely to seek help online rather than face-to-face, and may respond better to peer support than adult support



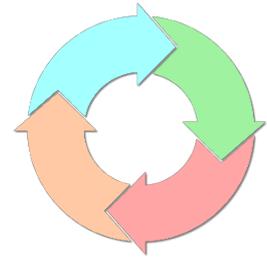
Hope Again is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. It has been designed by bereaved young people as a safe, interactive place where young people aged 11-18 can share their stories about loss and find information and advice, for example through video links, memory-making ideas, blogs and photos. <https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>



For further information on children's understanding of death at different ages, Child Bereavement UK has produced a short guidance film. <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/childrens-understanding-of-death-at-different-ages>

## The process of grief

There is no set pattern or time limit to grief. Different life events may re-awaken the sense of loss, and for children and young people they may need to revisit their grief at different stages of their development.



It is important for adults who are supporting children and young people to understand the process of grief.

The process of grief has several different dimensions and stages and these include shock, denial, growing awareness and the acceptance and readjusting to a new reality. The process of grief is not linear – people's emotions can change rapidly. Individuals may move backwards and forwards in the process.

**Shock** is the initial response to major loss. It can manifest itself in many ways, for example:

- |                                                                                     |                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Lack of response                                                                    | Numbness              |
| Physical collapse                                                                   | Silence or inactivity |
| Outburst of emotion (screaming, shouting, confusion in speech, change in behaviour) |                       |

The second stage of grief is **denial** and it is usually experienced during the onset the early stages of loss. Denial is used as a way of coping to deal with an inability to cope with loss and grief. An individual at this stage is attempting to come to terms with the loss. They may fluctuate between reality and denial.

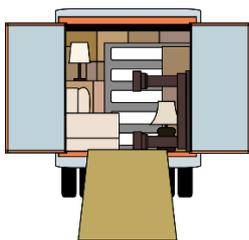
**Growing awareness** is the third dimension in the process of grief. It involves becoming aware of the reality and of the change and loss. At this stage, many different emotions will evolve including sadness, yearning, despair, guilt, anger, anxiety and depression.

Over time, these intense feelings of loss tend to decrease and the young person will be able to discuss their feelings more readily and return to established routines.

The process of **acceptance and readjustment** enables the bereaved young person to begin to participate in life once again. For most people, the grieving process can take approximately two years, but this is influenced by individual circumstances and contexts.

## Extra stress

There can be extra stress for children and young people when:



- routines are suddenly changed
- there are new situations to cope with (e.g. funerals, moving to a new house)
- parents or other adults are so upset they are not available to provide support
- they are asked to be different (e.g. be quiet, be helpful, be good)

## Reactions to bereavement

Children cannot sustain emotional pain in the same way that adults can. Children and young people tend to move in and out of grief. At times, they may appear to be coping much better than expected.

It is important to remember that children and young people may not have the words to express their feelings. Because their emotions may be expressed as angry outbursts or misbehaviour, rather than as sadness, they may not be recognised as grief-related.

### Possible Emotional Reactions

- Shock/numbness – An immediate reaction may not be shown as they struggle to absorb the implications of the news.
- Denial/disbelief – It may be difficult to accept the death. They may continue to talk about the dead person in the present tense or try to find the person.
- Panic/separation anxiety – They may fear their own or other family members' death. They may need reassurance as their world becomes insecure and they feel vulnerable.
- Sadness – They may be tearful or prone to sudden emotional outbursts.
- Anger – This may be expressed in words or in behaviour which signals intense pain.
- Guilt – They may feel something they did or did not do contributed to the death. This is often linked with anger and may lead to feelings of isolation.
- Exhaustion – Grief can feel physically and emotionally draining.
- Despair – They may feel overwhelmed and that nothing will ever be right again.
- Helplessness – They may feel out of control.
- Lowered self-esteem – As a result of changed circumstances and abilities.
- Regression – They may start doing things they did when they were younger (regress to an earlier stage of development). The child may be seeking to revert to a time when life was secure. For example, they may suck their thumb, lose previously gained skills or start wetting the bed.

### Possible Physical Reactions

distress	tiredness	minor illnesses	headaches
loss of appetite	difficulty sleeping	self-neglect	feeling cold
decrease in activity	panic attacks	nausea	shivering

### Possible Behavioural Reactions

aggression	restlessness	forgetfulness	detachment
loss of motivation	separation anxiety	school refusal	disorganisation
inability to concentrate			



For information on what to look out for when attempting to support a bereaved young person, see pages 11-12 of the following guidance:

[https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement\\_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf](https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf)

## The importance of looking after yourself as well as looking after a bereaved child or young person

Adults will be better able to help children and young people if they are taking care of themselves too.

If you are also grieving:

Try to...	Try not to...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Talk to other people (e.g. family, friends, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP, a support organisation) about the person who has died, your memories and your feelings</li> <li>✓ Look after yourself - eat properly and try to get enough rest (even if you can't sleep)</li> <li>✓ Give yourself time and permission to grieve</li> <li>✓ Seek help and support if you feel you need it</li> <li>✓ Tell people what you need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Isolate yourself</li> <li>✗ Keep your emotions bottled up</li> <li>✗ Think you are weak for needing help</li> <li>✗ Feel guilty if you are struggling to cope</li> <li>✗ Use temporary coping strategies such as alcohol</li> </ul>

If you are struggling with supporting a child or young person, find someone you both trust for support, for example a family member, friend, a faith/spiritual adviser, your GP, or a support organisation.



**Bereavement Advice Centre** offers a free helpline for people who are bereaved and for professionals. It also has information on its website about practical matters and coping with grief.  
<https://www.bereavementadvice.org/> Phone: 0800 634 9494



**Care for the Family** offers a variety of resources to those who are bereaved. The charity also runs events, support days and weekends away for different age groups.  
<http://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/> Phone: 029 2081 0800 Email: [mail@cff.org.uk](mailto:mail@cff.org.uk)



**Child Bereavement UK** supports families and educates professionals when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement. The organisation aims to provide families with the support they need to rebuild their lives.  
<http://childbereavementuk.org/> Phone: 01494 568900 Email: [support@childbereavementuk.org](mailto:support@childbereavementuk.org)



**Cruse Bereavement UK** offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies, and works to enhance society's care of bereaved people. Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support.  
<http://www.cruse.org.uk/> Phone: 020 8939 9530 (Office) 0808 808 1677 (Helpline)  
 Email: [info@cruse.org.uk](mailto:info@cruse.org.uk)



**Grief Encounter** offers personal support and a variety of resources to those bereaved. The organisation also provides training, professional support and resources for schools.  
<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/> Phone: 020 8371 8455 Email: [contact@griefencounter.org.uk](mailto:contact@griefencounter.org.uk)



**Samaritans** The Samaritans are there for people need them, at any time of day or night. The organisation reach 228,370 people a year in schools, hospitals and the homeless.  
<http://www.samaritans.org/> Phone: 0330 094 5717 Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)



**Sudden** is a global charitable initiative for suddenly bereaved people, and the people caring for them, including their families and professionals. This website cares for people who are suddenly bereaved. <http://www.suddendeath.org/>

## What families and professionals can do to support bereaved children and young people

It is important to be aware that each child's experience of grief is unique, and we cannot expect that they will express their emotions like adults. Their behaviours may not necessarily reveal their internal distress.

### Help children express their feelings

- Let children know you understand they are having difficult feelings and provide an environment where they feel safe to express their feelings in whatever way they can.
- Help them find ways to express their feelings, for example through play, writing a letter, a story, a poem, painting, drawing or music.
- Allow children time to talk, ask questions and share their worries. They may be very confused and need to ask lots of questions. You may have to answer the same questions over and over as children try to make sense of things.
- If a child finds it hard to talk you could open the way by saying something like: 'Some things are hard to talk about but talking things through can really help.'

### Share your feelings

- Share your feelings and tell children you are sad for their loss too – it helps them accept their feelings if they know others feel the same.
- Telling children how you are managing your feelings, even if you are sad, shows them that grief can be coped with. You will help them understand grief is a normal part of life.
- If you are really distressed it may not be wise to share this too much with children – they need to feel you are in control and can keep them safe

### Be honest

- Tell children what has happened simply and honestly in ways that suit their age and development. This helps them find ways to cope. Children need to know what has happened even if they do not ask.
- If you do not tell children you may prevent them from dealing with the loss. It may cause problems when they have other losses later in life.

### Provide routine and support

- Stick to family and school routines as much as you can – doing the same things as usual helps children feel safe. Keep to the same rules about what children are allowed to do.
- Make extra time to spend with children and young people – they will need closeness and comfort.
- When the time feels right it is important to help them to move on and try something new.

### Involve children in funerals and ceremonies

- When children or teenagers have lost someone close it can help to have a role in a funeral service or ceremony, or to remember the person in a special way.
- Sharing emotions and feeling connected with others can be a great support. However, it is important to consider a child's age and developmental level when making decisions about whether children attend funerals.



For advice on attending the funeral, see page 15 of the following guidance:

[https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement\\_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf](https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf)

## The importance of remembering

Grief is not about forgetting the person who has died, but finding ways to remember. By remembering, people can also heal. Being actively involved in creating ways of remembering is extremely helpful for both children and adults.

There is no right or wrong way of remembering. At its best, it is a deeply personal expression of love for this special person in their life who has died and yet lives on inside them.



**Memory box** – Buy or make a special box and fill it with precious possessions such as letters or cards from friends, dried flowers from the funeral, photographs or treasured possessions of the person who has died – for example a piece of jewellery, their glasses, a diary or letter.

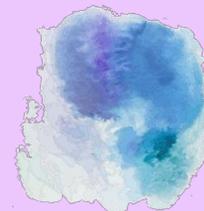
**Visiting the grave** – For some people this is a very important part of their mourning for the person who has died. This can be a way of maintaining a connection with the person, putting the rest of the world aside and communicating with them, for example by telling their news, expressing their sadness, and showing their love through flowers and other gifts.

**Memory book** – It can be a helpful process to create a special book in memory of the person who has died. It could contain photographs, poems, letters and thoughts. It can be looked through to help remember and think about that person.



**Planting trees or shrubs** – Some people like to plant a tree or a shrub as a way of remembering. It is important to make sure that a hardy plant tree or shrub is planted to reduce the risk of it dying. It is also important that it is planted in a place where it can be visited.

**Artwork** – Making artwork and framing it in memory of someone who has died can be a helpful activity for people who are bereaved. Making something in memory of someone special who has died helps connect to them in the making of it, and gives the bereaved person something to treasure in the future.



**Candles** – Lighting a candle and perhaps reading a special prayer or poem can be a simple and yet powerful way of commemorating an anniversary or other special time.

**Keeping a diary** – Writing a diary of their journey through grief can be helpful for bereaved people for a number of reasons. Putting into words what they feel can help release some of the pain. It is helpful as a reference point for them to look back on how they felt before – what they have been through and what it was like.



The Bereavement Box aims to provide children and young people with a wide range of remembering and celebrating activities and ideas – including all of the above key suggestions. Parents and carers can also use this resource which can be adapted to different circumstances. For information about this resource, see pages 24-26 of the following guidance:

[https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement\\_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf](https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf)

## Golden rules

How you can help and support a child or young person to deal with their loss is always difficult. The following golden rules may be helpful to adults and other young people in supporting them:

- Accept that the bereaved child's feelings may be very different to yours.
- Silence is Golden. Sometimes there are no words that bring enough comfort to take away the pain. Presence alone can sometimes say what words cannot.
- Be there to listen if they do want to talk. Grieving children often need to tell their stories repeatedly. Listening without judgement or interruption can be very helpful.
- Be truthful and always answer questions honestly.
- Empathise but never say: 'I know exactly what you feel'.
- Allow time to grieve as there is nothing to be gained by rushing the process.
- If you are too upset to help find someone else who can stand in for you for a while.
- Try to keep to predictable surroundings and routines.
- Always show love, care and consistency as these will act as healing tools.
- Provide reassurance that strong feelings are a normal part of grieving.
- Try to share positive and happy memories (prompt them to talk about happy times and good memories that they have.)
- Ensure the child understands that the pain of loss is a part of life and it isn't something to be ashamed of.
- Be sensitive to delayed grief responses and remember that there is no single timescale with coming to terms with loss.
- Discreetly praise other children and young people who make an effort to support a bereaved child. Focus on the fact that they are using important social skills that will help them throughout their own lives.



For information about supporting a child in returning to school, see pages 17-20 of the following guidance (also includes guidance for mentors working with individuals once a child has returned to school)

[https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement\\_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf](https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/bereavement_box-booklet-cov19-edition-2020-web.pdf)

## Referring on

It is important to recognise that children and young people who become stuck in their grief may need further support, especially when there is a traumatic circumstance surrounding the death. School staff, parents and carers need to vigilantly monitor behaviours to make a decision regarding the need for further specialist therapeutic support.

### Services in Bridgend



**Bridgend Community Bereavement Support** is a registered charity that has been operating since 2017. Their objective is to ensure that every bereaved adult, young person and child within the Bridgend County and surrounding areas can access consistent and high quality Bereavement services. <http://www.bridgendbereavement.co.uk/>

Tel: 073791 69836

Email: [hello@bridgendbereavement.co.uk](mailto:hello@bridgendbereavement.co.uk)



**Cruse Bereavement Care** offers support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies, and works to enhance society's care of bereaved people. Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. Cruse in Morgannwg covers Swansea, Neath, Port Talbot and Bridgend.

Email: [morgannwg@cruse.org.uk](mailto:morgannwg@cruse.org.uk)

Tel: 01792 462845