



## bereavement support for young people

When somebody close to you dies or is seriously ill, life can be tough. Many children and young people have found it helps to talk to someone who understands.



### Information Sheet: for parent / carer

#### when a close family member is affected by a serious illness

COVID 19 has changed how we can respond in some cases please also read

[Keeping In Touch When Someone May Die](#)

#### Coping with bad news:

When you find out that you or a loved one has a serious illness you can experience a whole range of conflicting emotions. Suddenly your normal life is disrupted; hopes and plans can be shattered. There are worries about the future and the final outcome of the illness. You need to learn about the illness and the treatment and consider how it will impact on family life. Adolescence is a period of change, developing independence, new friendships and academic pressures. Coping with a serious family illness can create additional stresses and responsibilities.

#### What do you tell them?

Children are quick to notice changes in appearance or in routine and can quickly sense a change of atmosphere when you are worried. Some children can even believe they are the cause of the stress. Children are far more able to cope with the situation if they are told the truth about what is happening in language that they understand. Trying to protect your children may result in you losing their trust. If they are not included, they may keep their worries to themselves and feel excluded.

Use simple messages in small, simple chunks so that they can consider and absorb the situation. Be prepared to repeat the information and tell them a little more each time. It usually helps to tell the children the name of the disease. Many parents find it helps to rehearse what they want to say. See the Macmillan website suggestions about ['How to tell your children.'](#)

#### Talking about treatment:

It is important to prepare the family if there is a possibility that the illness and the treatment will cause changes to appearance e.g. weight gain or loss, hair loss, or tubes connected to the body. Sometimes medication can affect how someone speaks. It might also make them very sleepy. Try to explain this before seeing their loved one. When children and young people have not been included, they can feel shocked by significant changes or regret missed opportunities. It can be helpful to discuss this gently but honestly.



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### Answering questions:

Encouraging questions will help to make everyone feel included and more able to understand what is happening. You don't have to have all the answers: it's ok to say you don't know but will try to find out. You can ask the professionals supporting you for simple honest explanations to pass on or call Macmillan for advice on explaining about cancer on 0808 808 0000 Monday to Friday, 9am - 8pm. Try to avoid false hope. [Winston's Wish](#) has advice about the importance of difficult conversations.

### School (it is important to keep school advised of changes to ensure the best support):

Some young people will want to go to school as a place to feel that everything is normal, and some might be concerned about keeping up with work. In other cases, a child might be unable to concentrate or be worried about crying. The more school is kept informed the more they can do to support the young person. Encourage your child to talk to their teacher if they are worried and ask the school to be understanding and alert to any changes in their behaviour.

### If a brother or sister is seriously ill:

When a sibling is seriously ill normal life can be disrupted, time with parents will be affected, and responsibilities at home might increase. The healthy children can feel overlooked or less important. Sometimes they can blame themselves for the illness. Try to keep to routines as much as possible and find a little time to play and pay attention to them. Again, it is important to keep school aware of the situation and ask to be advised of any changes in behaviour.

### When the person is not going to get better:

Sometimes it is necessary to accept that the person is not going to recover, the illness or disability is likely to be permanent or the loved one is going to die. Again, the most important thing is to find a way to explain honestly in age appropriate language. Do not be surprised if you have to explain several times, encourage the child to tell you what they have understood so that you can try to clarify any confusion. In some cases, a young person will try to deny what is happening, avoid the patient or carry on as normal. The Sunflower Project can offer information and advice to help you find the words.

For further information we recommend the following websites:

### [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org) : When someone is not expected to live: Supporting children

Advice for how to support a child when someone close has a very serious illness.

[The Invisible String by Patricia Karst Read by Big Papa Scott](#) A story on You Tube to help with separation anxiety

[www.riprap.org.uk](http://www.riprap.org.uk)

Helps you cope when a parent has cancer.

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Advice on talking to children and young people about cancer

The Sunflower Project can provide opportunities for a young person to explore how they are feeling about the illness and share their fears without worrying about upsetting those around them. We can help you find the words that you need to explain and have suggestions for children to tell their friends and teachers.

If you would like more information or are concerned and think that your child would like to talk to someone outside of your family, please contact The Sunflower Project via the links below.



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