

Information for parents and carers about supporting children and young people after a bereavement.

How children grieve?

Children may feel grief just like adults, but they do not always express it in the same way. We cannot prevent them from experiencing the pain of loss, but we can help them in their sadness. It is also very normal for a child to move between emotions quickly perhaps extremely distressed one moment and then asking what is for tea the next.

How young people grieve?

Adolescence is a time of great changes; teenagers are developing their own identity and emotions run high. Part of growing up is becoming independent and this is often a time of conflict with loved ones. If a family member dies during this unsettled period feelings can be confusing and unbearable. Grief and shock cut people off from one another and it can be hard to empathise with each other's feelings. The bereaved can try to protect others from how they are feeling when talking about things could really help.

Children and young people like to be included where possible. We must be considerate of their needs to acknowledge their worries and try to explain what is happening in terms that they can understand. A child's understanding of death is affected by their developmental stage:

Children under 6:

- May not understand that death is forever and expect the person to come back
- Take explanations literally and may need you to repeat them often
- May show regressive or disruptive behaviours
- May cry, be anxious about separations and want to share a bed
- Use magical thinking. Young children can imagine that they are responsible for death because they think everything revolves around them

Primary school aged children:

- Begin to understand that death is forever and may find it scary or fascinating
- Lack the vocabulary to express feelings and may show regressive behaviours
- Can be afraid that other loved ones may die

Teenagers:

- Have an adult understanding of death, express their grief in adult ways and may want to be included
- Recognise that life will never be the same and dread feeling different from their peers
- Some cope best by talking to the family about feelings and loss, others seek to be more independent and prefer help from friends or trusted adult

Common reactions include:

- Anxiety – worry about other family members
- Feel overwhelmed by intense feelings of anger and act out with unexplained behaviours
- Sadness and longing
- Guilt, self-reproach and blame – this can be irrational e.g. 'I made her cross, so she's gone'
- Difficulties in concentrating
- Problems with sleep, not wanting to go to sleep or waking from distressing dreams
- Physical health complaints – unexplained aches and pains

How can we help:

Talk to children about what has happened using words that they understand. Use the words 'dead' or 'died' and avoid euphemisms like 'passed' or 'gone away' (this can make it much harder to explain the permanence of death when the person does not come back). Accept that the child might only want to talk for a few minutes and then move on. It is normal for you to have to repeat your explanations and don't assume that they have understood first time.

It is often said that you should not be a hero, but a model to children and young people. If you try to shield children from the truth they are likely to sense something is wrong and imagine their own horrors or worry about why their feelings are so different to those around them. Encourage them to explore their feelings and share their worries through talk, play, art and acknowledge your own. Ask if anything is worrying them and reassure them that **'nothing they said or did or thought caused their loved one to die'**. Be honest in an age appropriate way. It is very hard for a child to have conflicting stories or to learn the truth from somewhere else.

Even though routines are disrupted, having regular mealtimes and bedtime routines help a child to feel safe. Try to avoid unnecessary separations and give clear directions about who will be caring for them and when you will be back or when they will be able to talk to you.

It is not unusual to have difficulties with sleep after a bereavement. *[**Health for Kids - How can I help my child sleep**](#) and **[**Childline – Problems sleeping**](#) (for teenagers) recognise how good sleep is essential for children to feel happy, healthy and better able to manage their grief. Check out the websites for help and advice about getting a good night's rest.

How can we help children to grieve? Many families find it helps to:

- Participate in the rituals or find opportunities to say goodbye. This might be by viewing the body, attending the funeral, writing a letter, or drawing a picture to be put in the coffin. Children should always be well prepared and allowed to choose how they are included, with the option to change their mind at any point
- Make a memory box or book which can be decorated and keep photos, keepsakes, drawings, and stories that remind the children of their special person
- Talk about the person who has died, celebrate anniversaries and although this can be hard it is important to find some happy memories because your loved one would not want everyone to be sad
- Keep listening to what children are saying and acknowledge that things are strange and difficult
- Keep children informed and reassure them that their loved one knew they were loved and cared for

The logo for Sunflower Project, a stylized sunflower icon.

sunflower project

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.

- Reach out for support from **The Sunflower Project** (tel: 07839 433838 or info@youthcommission.gg) which supports bereaved children and young people. For adults the Guernsey Bereavement Service can be contacted on 257778
- Look after yourself, you have been bereaved too and are managing your own grief. Sometimes parents/carers worry that they have done or said something wrong. Remember you are doing your best and you might have to say 'I'm sorry I think I might have explained this wrong' or 'I should have done but I wasn't sure what would help'. That's okay. We are only human.

Website addresses used above:

Child Bereavement UK- How Children and Young People Grieve

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people>

*Health for Kids - How can I help my child sleep - <https://www.healthforkids.co.uk/grownups/health-issues/how-can-help-child-sleep/> (select 'view site without local content')

*Childline – Problems Sleeping - <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/feelings-emotions/problems-sleeping/>

Grief Encounter – offers advice and information - <https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/advice-and-information/>