

Parents and Carers

When supporting a bereaved family, or informing other families of a death within the school community, parents and carers may appreciate guidance to help them respond to questions and better understand reactions from their children. Below is information they find helpful and reassuring.

Most children and young people affected by a death just need adults who care about them. You cannot take away their sadness, but you can acknowledge it and support them through the experience. Reactions will vary. If they were not close to the person who died, they may be unaffected. However it is best not to make assumptions. Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them.

Questions are healthy, as is curiosity. A good approach with any age is to acknowledge what has happened and then answer questions as they arise. Having accurate information will enable you to answer questions with facts rather than rumour. Try to obtain this from a reliable source such as the school your children attend. Remember to be sensitive to the wishes of the bereaved family and if possible, check how much information they wish to be made public.

Young children often do not have adult inhibitions surrounding death and you may be taken aback by some of their comments and reactions. It is not unusual for them to act out funerals or play at being dead. It is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Teenagers may become withdrawn and difficult to engage with. Respect their need for personal space whilst gently reminding that you are there if they need you.

Children often have a surprising capacity to deal with the truth, if given information in simple, straightforward language, appropriate for their age and understanding. Young children tend to make up what they do not know and their imaginings are often worse than the reality. Adolescents and teenagers will resent a lack of honesty in the adults around them and the resultant loss of trust will be hard to regain.

Maintain routines, such as going to school. Familiar situations and contact with friends brings security and a sense of normality. Continue to expect usual rules of behaviour. Normality with love and compassion is what to aim for.

Do not think that you have to hide your own sadness. Seeing adults expressing emotion can give a child of any age “permission” to do the same, if they feel they want to. Hearing how you are feeling may help them to consider their own feelings. Be ready to listen but don’t expect your child to always want to talk. They usually will when ready, and often to people who are not immediate family. One way to create opportunities for sharing thoughts and memories is with a joint activity. Young people especially, tend to talk when they do not feel under pressure to do so.

You may notice some of the following which are all normal as long as they do not go on for too long:

- Change in behaviour, perhaps becoming unnaturally quiet and withdrawn or unusually aggressive. Anger is a common response at all ages and may be directed at people or events which have no connection to the death.
- Disturbed sleep and bad dreams.
- Anxiety demonstrated by clinging behaviour and a reluctance to be separated from parents or carers. Older children may express this in more practical ways, with concerns over issues that adults may perceive as insensitive, such as lifts to activities.
- Being easily upset by events that would normally be trivial.
- Difficulty concentrating, being forgetful and generally “not with it.” This makes school work particularly hard and academic performance may suffer. Older children may feel that there is no point in working hard at school and might lose a general sense of purpose in their lives.
- Physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches and a general tendency to be run down and prone to minor illness.

Grief is a natural and necessary response to a death. However, if concerned about your child, do not hesitate to seek advice.

Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Team

Can be contacted on 0800 02 888 40 for guidance, information, resources and signposting to other organisations.

Resources

CBUK Information Sheets www.childbereavement.org.uk/publications

Children’s understanding of death at different ages

How children and young people grieve

What helps grieving children and young people

Talking About Death: A dialogue between parent and child by Earl Grollman

A guide for adults and children to read together which helps with words and explanations for some of the questions that children might ask. Available from Amazon.

Cost £9.30

A Child’s Grief

Useful and informative short book for any adult who is supporting a bereaved child. It covers a variety of issues and offers practical suggestions and activities. From Winston’s Wish Tel: 01242 515157

Cost £6.95

When Your Partner Dies: supporting your children

Information and guidance for surviving parents and carers who are trying to manage their own grief and that of their children. Buy from From Child Bereavement UK or as a free download at www.childbereavementuk.org/Support/Families/Readingandresources/Supportforadults

Cost £2.50 or free download