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## Children with special needs and their grief

All children and young people, regardless of their circumstances, have a right to have their grief recognised, hear the truth and to be given opportunities to express their feelings and emotions. Children with learning difficulties are no different but may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings.

Helping children with special needs deal with their grief may present particular issues that teachers, parents and carers need to acknowledge. Children with special needs may have little sense of the permanence of death, as this is not yet developed and they long for things to be the same as they were before. In some cases they may never come to a complete understanding of the finality of death, believing that the dead person has gone away and will return one day. But this is no reason to abandon them in their confusion and grief.

### Communicating the Truth

Children with learning difficulties are sometimes assumed to need protection from death and dying more than most or not have the capacity to understand. Whilst to a certain extent this is true, we often underestimate their abilities to cope with the tough things in life. The challenge is finding creative ways to communicate when words are sometimes not appropriate.

- If using words, use the real ones e.g. dead and dying, not euphemisms.
- Use as many real life examples as you can, e.g. pictures of funerals and coffins to aid understanding.
- Acknowledge any death. To ignore what has happened implies that this is an unimportant event and denies the existence of the person who has died.
- Try not to exclude the child from the helpful rituals of death, such as condolence cards or attending the funeral. If this is not appropriate, make sure that they are given an opportunity to say goodbye with their own simple ceremony.
- Pre-grief work is especially important to help them prepare for an expected death. A well thought through visit to a hospice or hospital will help with this process. This could be backed up with recordings of popular medical TV programmes that depict someone seriously ill and then dying.

### Understanding the concept of death

All children struggle with the concept of death and its permanence. Children with learning difficulties may find this particularly difficult to grasp and benefit from simple, practical examples to illustrate the difference between dead and living things. Very visual explanations are particularly important for children on the autistic spectrum. Some of these ideas may seem macabre but it is what many SEN children need.

- Buy a bunch of flowers, put them in a vase and observe them wilt, wither, and die. Compare to a fresh bunch of the same type. If kept, the dead flowers will illustrate that death is permanent, the flowers do not return to life.
- Purchase a dead fish from the supermarket and compare it to a live one. Even when put into a bowl of water the dead one will not move, breath, eat or swim.
- Give the dead fish a burial that replicates as far as possible a real one. Explain a cremation by burning leaves and mixing the resulting ashes with some earth.
- Take photographs of the above and put into a book. This will act as a visual reminder for the many times when the explanation will need to be repeated.

- Visiting the dead body will help with the concept of no life, but this will need careful preparation. Feeling that it is cold, observing no breathing or movement can aid understanding that the body is no longer working.

### Expressing their grief

Children do not need protection from the feelings and emotions associated with grief, but support to express them and reassurance that these sometimes powerful and overwhelming emotions are normal and necessary. This is even more the case for children with learning difficulties.

- Use a simple workbook such as “When Someone Very Special Dies” by Marge Heegard. This can easily be adapted for various ability levels.
- Looking at photographs or watching videos of the person who has died can facilitate expressions of sadness or anger.
- Try to act as a role model, shed tears if genuinely felt, use symbols to communicate how you are feeling but also to reassure the child that you are OK and your response is natural.
- Carrying a comfort object such as a small piece of warm furry blanket can be an aid for getting through difficult moments.
- Offer opportunities for safe ways to express frustration and anger which for all children can play a big part in their grief. Reassure that being angry is OK. Use a huge sheet of paper and a selection of paints, wet clay, rolled up newspaper to shred by hitting against a desk.

### Remembering the dead person

When someone important to a child or young person dies, memories are an important part of the grief process. The deceased may be physically gone from their lives but the emotional bond will still be there. This is particularly true when a parent or main carer dies. Memories help any child to construct a sense of who it is they are grieving for and why. All have a part to play, whether of happy times or ones that were not so good.

- A piece of fabric, from an item of clothing worn by the person who has died, carried in a pocket or made into a cushion can be very emotive.
- Their favourite perfume or aftershave on a hanky.
- Putting together a memory box of tangible reminders chosen by the child. This can help give some insight into factors and events that are key to the relationship with the dead person.
- Listening to audio tapes of the voice or favourite music of the dead person may help the visually impaired.
- Use photographs to create a timeline to spark off memories of significant events and then build the deceased’s life story.

### Resources

There is little around for SEN children and it is often a case of adapting mainstream resources. The following books are particularly appropriate.

#### **When Someone Very Special Dies** by Marge Heegard.

A simple non directive workbook.

Cost £7.99

#### **When Uncle Bob Died** by Althea.

A simple explanation of death with drawings of a funeral.

Cost £5.99

#### **Beginnings and Endings With Lifetimes In Between** by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen.

A beautifully illustrated book depicting the life cycle with 3 generations.

Cost £5.99

**Let`s talk about DEATH** a booklet about death and funerals for young people with a learning disability.

Photographs support the text.

Published by Scottish Down`s Syndrome Association

Tel: 0131 313 4225

#### [www.bereavementanddisability.org.uk](http://www.bereavementanddisability.org.uk)

A website with useful guides for carers and professionals to download, offering ideas for support and information on SEN adults and bereavement.

Much of what is said could be adapted for children and young people.

*Based on Erica Brown’s article “Special Education Needs And Bereaved Children”*