

Pupils with special needs

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.

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 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.
- Pre-grief work is especially important to help prepare for an expected death.

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, especially the permanence, 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 a bit 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.
- If appropriate, 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.
- Act as a role model, shed tears if genuinely felt, use symbols to communicate how you are feeling but also reassure 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.
- Reassure that being angry is OK. Offer opportunities for safe ways to express frustration and anger which for all children can play a big part in their grief. Use a huge sheet of paper and a selection of paints, or wet sponges to throw against an outside wall, rolled up newspaper to shred by hitting against a desk.

Remembering the dead person

- A piece of fabric from an item of clothing carried in a pocket or made into a cushion can be very emotive.
- Their favourite perfume or after shave 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 a timeline to spark off memories of significant events and pictures to build the deceased's life story.

Resources

See fact sheet "Books for SEN Children and Young People"

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

www.childbereavementuk.org/for schools/lesson plans/Lesson Plan 1, The End of Life

Using objects from the natural world, this lesson plan helps children to explore ageing and dying. It could easily be adapted for children and young people with SEN.

SAD by Lucy Finch

A beautifully designed creative resource, including a story, emotion stickers and a pot of memories. Only available direct from the creator, www.behance.net/lucy_finch

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

Supporting Bereaved Children and Young People with Autistic Spectrum Difficulties

Viewing a Body with a Child

Explaining Funerals Burial and Cremation to children

What happens when someone dies by Jenny Armstrong.

Photographs give clear simple explanations of what happens and the people who take part. Available from SeeSaw www.seesaw.org.uk.

Cost £7.99

Bereavement and Loss: Supporting bereaved people with PMLD and their parents

A learning resource pack with helpful guidance and practical ideas. Includes a DVD with real life stories. Available from PAMIS www.pamis.org.uk

Cost £24.99