

BEREAVEMENT, LOSS AND GRIEF—GUIDANCE 3

Information for School Staff: How to support children and young people with bereavement, loss and grief

What might you notice?

Children and young people may react in different ways to the news that someone has died. It is important that we remember that 'all behaviour is communication'. In the next few days, and maybe for longer, they may communicate their many different feelings through the following behaviours:

- ♦ **Physical symptoms** of stress e.g. headache, feeling sick, trembling, palpitations, dry mouth, needing to go to the toilet more frequently
- ♦ Being angry or on a **short fuse** with family members and friends
- ♦ **Separation difficulties** – not wanting to let parents or siblings out of sight
- ♦ **Sudden thoughts** about what has happened – these can be triggered at any time and can make it difficult to concentrate and make decisions
- ♦ Finding it **harder to relax** and sleep disturbances
- ♦ Finding it **difficult to talk** about what has happened. When children find it difficult to talk they will often express their feelings through behaviour, play or a creative activity instead e.g. drawing.
- ♦ Feeling **afraid and vulnerable** – children may try to hide these feelings
- ♦ **Denial** – they may seem surprisingly unaffected. This can be because they are unconsciously avoiding the emotional pain.
- ♦ **Guilt** – this is a common response to death, especially if the child is unable to express their sadness about the loss. They will need reassurance that nothing they did had anything to do with the death that occurred. In the event of an accident it is important to emphasise that no-one was to blame.



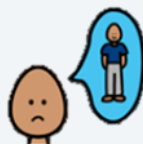
All of these behaviours are normal reactions to hearing about a death.

How to help a bereaved child or young person

Acknowledge what has happened. Let the child or young person know that you know of their circumstances. Do not be afraid to use the word dead/death.

Be clear, open and honest. Use simple concrete language that is suited to the child or young person. Avoid using euphemisms as they can lead to confusion and increased worry. If required, give basic facts without giving too much detail. Be guided by the child or young person's questions. Aim to be open but be aware that it is not always practised socially or culturally. Find out what the child or young person knows and speak with parents/carers about how to support the child or young person. You should also be aware of any religious understandings of death and loss.

Normalise. Let the child or young person know that different feelings are associated with bereavement and loss. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Giving it a name can help "Name it to tame it".



Expect questions – when faced with loss or change, children and young people will ask questions to help them make sense of what is happening. This can be challenging for adults. You do not need to have all the answers and it is OK to say when you do not. Some questions may be asked repeatedly when children and young people need reassurance. This does not reflect on your response. The child is continuing to explore their thoughts and feelings.

Be available – when a child or young person needs to talk. They may break off from conversation. This is fine. They will come back to it if they want to/when they are ready. Do not be surprised by their ability to set the grief aside. Play helps children express themselves and release anxiety. Children and young people need to know it is ok to feel happy. Be comfortable with your own emotions. If you are affected, share this. It is good for them to know other people are experiencing emotions without overwhelming them.

Provide space and time – children and young people will also need opportunities to be quiet and process their thoughts.

Allow the right not to talk – this can be difficult. Look for opportunities where feelings and emotions can be expressed through play, drama and creative activities.

Provide reassurance – being supportive and predictable helps make children and young people feel safe. Maintaining routines and consistency can also help.

Look after yourself – your capacity to help is related to how well you feel. If you have recently been bereaved you are probably not the best person to be offering support at the moment. For more information about staff self-care, please see guidance 4 in this collection.

Memory Box

Children collect items in a special box. Items that remind them of the person who has died and times shared with them. Examples could include: cards received, perfume or aftershave, shells from a beach holiday, tickets from an outing, an item of clothing, jewellery or photographs.



Memory Playlist

A playlist of music that the person who died loved can be helpful as a way of connecting with the memories and processing emotions.



Perfume / Aftershave

Spraying the aftershave or perfume of the person who died onto a scarf or hankie can be a source of comfort.



Family Record

This can help a child or young person gain a sense of where they, and the person who has died, fit into the family. A family tree can be put together. Family photographs, documents, certificates and mementoes can be included. It can be particularly powerful to include stories about the person's life which can be contributed by family members and friends. For example, what was the funniest thing the person ever did? What was their best subject at school? If you are going to include videos or sound tapes of the person who has died consider making a copy just to be on the safe side.



Memory Jar

It can be difficult for some children to express their thoughts or feelings around a bereavement. A memory jar is a visual way of representing these memories. A jar can be layered with different colours of chalk mixed with salt to represent different memories, you can also add objects to the jar that have significant meanings.



Comfort Cushion

Made from pieces of fabric belonging to the person who has died (shirts, blouses, trousers). You can also have a photograph of the person who died printed on the cushion. Hugging the cushion can provide comfort.



What should I say?

Children and young people have very literal interpretations of language, more so than adults, and for this reason it is important to be mindful of the words and phrases we use. For example, **avoid** saying the following:

- ♦ 'Went to sleep'
- ♦ 'Passed on/away'
- ♦ 'Gone to the other side'
- ♦ 'Now you have to be a big boy/girl'
- ♦ 'Your family needs you to be strong'
- ♦ 'I know just how you feel'
- ♦ 'At least...'
- ♦ 'Your mum/dad would not want you to be...'



It's really nice to see you back. If you want to talk about anything, I'm here.

How are you feeling?

When someone dies, it is ok to talk about how you feel.

If a difficult topic comes up or you become upset in class, please use this time out pass.

Let me think about that and I'll get back to you.

I am very sorry to hear that your mum has died.

Tell me more...

This guidance is part of a 'Bereavement, Loss and Grief' collection that aims to provide parents, carers and school staff with information to help them understand and support any bereaved child or young person.

Parents, carers and staff might also find the following helpful:

- ♦ 'Bereavement , loss and grief: Developmental stage and understanding'

School staff might also find the following helpful:

- ♦ 'Bereavement , loss and grief: Developmental stage and understanding'
- ♦ 'Bereavement, loss and grief: Staff support and self-care'