

# **YOUNG CHILDREN GRIEVE TOO**

**A Guide for Parents and  
Carers of Children Under 6  
Who Have Been Bereaved**



**Barnardos**

## INTRODUCTION


This booklet explores some of the issues for children under the age of 6 when someone dies. It offers advice to parents and carers of children and to those who are supporting families through this difficult time.

Death is an inevitable part of life and grief is a universal human process. We cannot shield young children from the reality of death or the pain of loss. What we can do is accompany them on their journey through grief with informed support, information and encouragement.

Children's understanding of death depends on their age and stage of development. They experience the pain of loss as intensely as adults but they will express it in different ways. Because of their emotional and intellectual immaturity, young children do not have the thinking ability to make sense of death. They may also not have the words to describe their feelings, thoughts and memories so it will be their behaviour that will guide you as to how they are feeling.

Adults instinctively want to shield or protect children from death. You can't fix or reverse what has happened but you can do your best to help children through the reality of this difficult time in an honest and open manner.

Remember that you are the expert on your child – you have the best sense of their character and their level of understanding.



**CARE OF YOUNG CHILDREN  
CAN BE EXHAUSTING, MAKE  
SURE TO TAKE UP OFFERS OF  
SUPPORT AND PRACTICAL  
HELP AT THIS TIME.**

## CHILDREN 0-2 YEARS

Babies experience the world mainly through their senses and physical sensations. It is generally accepted that children under two do not understand the meaning of death but react strongly to separation. While babies and toddlers cannot understand adults' words, they will easily pick up on tone, body language, and sense when adults are upset.

Very young children will notice when someone close to them suddenly disappears and can become anxious or upset. Babies and toddlers may be cranky and clingy during this time. Toddlers may become upset or subdued and uninterested in their surroundings. They are likely to become very distressed when other adults leave the room or the house – unsure if they too are going to disappear.

Because infants get to know their world through the important people in it, they will miss familiar smells, touches and sounds.

Though children of this age cannot verbalise their feelings, it is important to recognise what they may be noticing and missing. Perhaps the person, who has died spoke with them, held them, played with them, read to them and maybe sang with them in a particular way.

## How you can help

- Bereaved children need to feel safe and cared for. Keep to routines of feeding and sleeping to maintain the child's feelings of security and continuity.
- Try to surround them with familiar smells, tastes, textures, sounds, rhythms and routines in familiar surroundings.
- If there has been the death of a parent, particularly a mother, place an item of clothing belonging to the deceased in the child's cot or bed. Its familiar smell will be comforting.
- Talk to the child about what has happened. They will not understand your words but will pick up on your feelings through their sense of sound and touch.
- Where possible, try to limit the number of carers at this time in order to provide consistency and continuity of care.
- Be prepared and patient if there is regression in some learned behaviours such as eating, walking, sleeping independently and use of words.

Children will see-saw in and out of their grief as they cannot sustain emotional pain for long periods. This can be distressing and upsetting to adults and can mislead you into thinking the child is coping better than they really are, as much of the time they will carry on as normal.

## CHILDREN 2-5 YEARS

The permanency of death is a very difficult concept to grasp. At this age children may continue to believe that the dead person will return, that they are only away for a short time or that they can visit them. They may be surprised and disappointed that their loved one does not reappear for their birthday, or for other special occasions. As adults we understand that this is not possible, but young children do not have the same level of understanding and it is easy for us to forget this. Children may seem to understand this one day and have forgotten the next.

Children may become anxious about strangers or their carer leaving them, be clingy and need a lot of reassurance. Regressive behaviours, such as bed wetting, soiling and sleep disturbances are also common.

Younger children can also be helped by their own natural openness as well as their ability to be concrete and direct.

Preschool or other childcare facilities can be very helpful in observing and supporting your child at this time as they will have a good sense of what is different. Encourage childcare staff to talk about their experience and give you feedback of their observations.

## How you can help

- Give children the time they need to understand – you may need to repeat the story of what has happened over and over.
- Be clear and honest. Despite your instinct to protect, information that is not truthful can be harmful.
- Your child may seek extra affection.
- It is okay for your child to see that you are grieving and be assured that this is normal.
- Avoid trying to ‘cheer the child up’ if they are distressed and sad. Instead, offer comfort and understanding, ‘I know you are very sad and upset.’
- It can be tempting to shower the child with treats and surprises at this time. If possible, it is better to avoid this.

In the long term, ensure that conversations or activities in your child’s preschool or other childcare facility include your child, regardless of the death. Making mother’s/father’s day cards, for example. These can be important activities to help children to maintain the bond with their deceased loved one.

## CASE STUDY

When Mary was three, her grandad died following a year-long battle with cancer. Previously, Mary had visited their house regularly as her grandparents lived nearby. Her grandad played the piano and they used to sing and play nursery rhymes together. During the periods of time when Grandad had been receiving treatment, his absence was explained honestly, that he was sick and was in hospital where doctors and nurses were trying to help him get better.

After Grandad's death, Mary went to stay with her other grandparents and was not included in the funeral. No one said anything once Mary returned home. The next time the family visited Grandad's house, Mary asked where he was and was told he was in heaven. Mary continued playing with her toys. She asked every day for a week if Grandad could play the piano with her. Granny told her that he couldn't come as he was in heaven and was probably playing the piano up there.

Mary began following her mother around the house during the day.

A week later, Mary's mother became unwell with a chest infection. She brought Mary with her to the doctors. Her mother explained that the doctor would help her to get better. Mary turned to her mother and asked, 'Are you going to heaven now too? Can I come with you to play piano with Grandad?'



In the case study opposite, Mary has been given some information that is accurate and some that would be difficult for a three year old to understand. Children will process the information they have and often come up with explanations or stories that are not possible or, in some cases, that can leave them feeling very uncertain and even scared. For example, if heaven is a concept that is being used, it is important to explain this in simple terms along with the explanation about what being dead means.

It would be helpful for Mary to understand that when a person is dead they don't need their body any more, that it no longer works and that the person can't come back again. Children will have become used to people coming back after work or an outing and it is important to emphasise the difference. It should be explained that the love and memories of the person are for us to keep in our hearts.

In this example it would also be very important to explain to Mary that most people do get better again when they are sick. Talking about Grandad and what they used to do together would also be valuable, as well as space to acknowledge the sadness at his death.

Children will process as much information as they can – it is important that they can return and ask for more information when they are ready or are confused. Children often ask for explanations about how a person can be in the ground, in heaven and in their heart all at the same time.



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## TELLING A CHILD THAT SOMEONE HAS DIED

The following will give an outline of some steps and supports that can help in explaining the nature and the meaning of a death to a child.

- Don't be afraid to use words like dead and dying. Even though they seem harsh, they are less likely to lead to misunderstandings.
- Be careful about using phrases like 'She has gone to sleep', 'He has gone away' or 'We lost Granddad'. Children may get confused by these terms and our everyday use of them. Children of this age often regard sleeping and death as being the same. The difference needs to be explained.
- Be prepared to repeat the story several times and answer repeated questions. This is your child's way of making sense of what has happened. Children often become confused by the explanations and may need to be told repeatedly about the death.
- You or someone close to the child should tell them what has happened, preferably at home where they feel safe. If a family member is dying, the news is best told by a parent. If at all possible, children should be allowed to spend some time with the dying loved one in order to share feelings and allow for loving farewells.
- If a death is sudden, the child will probably feel most protected if informed by a close family member, preferably a parent. If this is not possible and the child is told by another adult, as soon as possible try to reunite

the child with a trusted adult, preferably a parent, who can repeat the news. Otherwise children may have greater difficulty in accepting the loss and may distance themselves from the reality.

- Be specific. Very young children are not able to understand that death is irreversible, so you could try to explain death as being like a broken toy that cannot be mended. The dead person cannot be mended and although we want to, we cannot put it right. Explain that the person's body has stopped working and it will not do the things it used to do like walking, talking, moving or breathing. Tell your child that the dead person does not feel anything: they are not sad, not hurting, or feeling cold or ill. The dead person will not need to eat or sleep.



- Children of this age may believe in magic and often make a link between their own thoughts, actions and wishes, and outcomes over which they actually have no control. If a child has been angry and wished somebody away or dead then they may feel responsible and guilty about the death. It is important to reassure them in this instance that the death is not their fault.
- Children between the ages of two and five may become quiet and apathetic once they realise the dead person is not coming back. Acknowledge and allow the sad feelings. Don't try to cheer them up but increase holding, cuddles, warm drinks, baths etc. to enhance feelings of security.
- Ensure that the childminder, school or preschool are aware of the death and enlist their support in helping the child and in watching out for any signs of distress. They can be a good source of information for you as to how your child is doing outside of the home.
- Enlist the help of family and friends. Caring for young children when you are bereaved yourself can be exhausting.
- As time goes on, children need opportunities to remember the person who has died.



Children need to see adults cry and express sadness and other feelings, so they learn how to mourn too. And they need to be allowed to comfort others, so they can receive comfort more easily in return.

## REMEMBER

- There are no definite rules as to whether children should or should not view the body of the deceased but it can be helpful for the child to see the body **while being supported by an adult**. Most children say they would have appreciated having been given the choice. Even if they choose not to see the body, it is helpful to describe to them how the deceased looked. In the absence of some mental picture, fantasy may be much worse than reality.
- A return to earlier behaviour patterns such as temper tantrums, clinginess, wanting to be picked up and thumb sucking may be experienced by children going through a loss.
- Experience of death at this age can undermine self confidence and the child's world can become unreliable and insecure. Try to keep routines like mealtimes, bath times and bedtimes as regular as possible.
- Children will search for the missing parent/carer and repeatedly ask the same questions. This is normal behaviour as they tend not to see death as permanent but see it as reversible and temporary.

## **PROFESSIONAL CARERS OF A BEREAVED CHILD**

If you have a child in your childcare facility or care who has experienced bereavement, it is important to link in with the child's parent or main carer around what has happened. It is essential to share any necessary information needed in order to support the child while they are in your care. It will be useful to know how the death has been explained to the child, what they have witnessed and how they have been responding.

Check in with the child's parent or carers about what to share about the death with other children and their families in your care facility.

Share queries, observations, concerns and positive feedback with the child's parent or carers on a regular basis. Acknowledge the death with the child – it is important that they understand that you know what has happened in their world. Home life can become unfamiliar and disorganised after a death and childcare can be a source of comfort due to its familiar routines.

It can be distressing for staff members who come into contact with a bereaved child. Support one another and get the information you need in order to be available to support the child and family.



## **PRACTICAL HELP**

**Children need help with preserving memories about the person who has died for when they get older. This might include:**

- Their own keepsakes from the person who died
- A box or a bag to keep special mementoes
- A book of memories, which could include drawings, paintings, writings, letters and photographs
- Special activities to mark birthdays and anniversaries

**Various activities can enable children to express their emotions, such as:**

- Any kind of exercise or physical activity
- All kinds of creative play: drawing, painting, play dough or music
- Telling the story over and over again through play acting, toys or puppets
- Talking to the person who has died – perhaps on a toy telephone – or writing a letter

**Ways to help a bereaved child feel less lonely could include:**

- Reading books about bereavement – see reading resources
- Allowing them to take part in memorial activities with other family members and friends
- Arranging for them to meet other children who have had similar experiences

## OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

### Your own grief and support

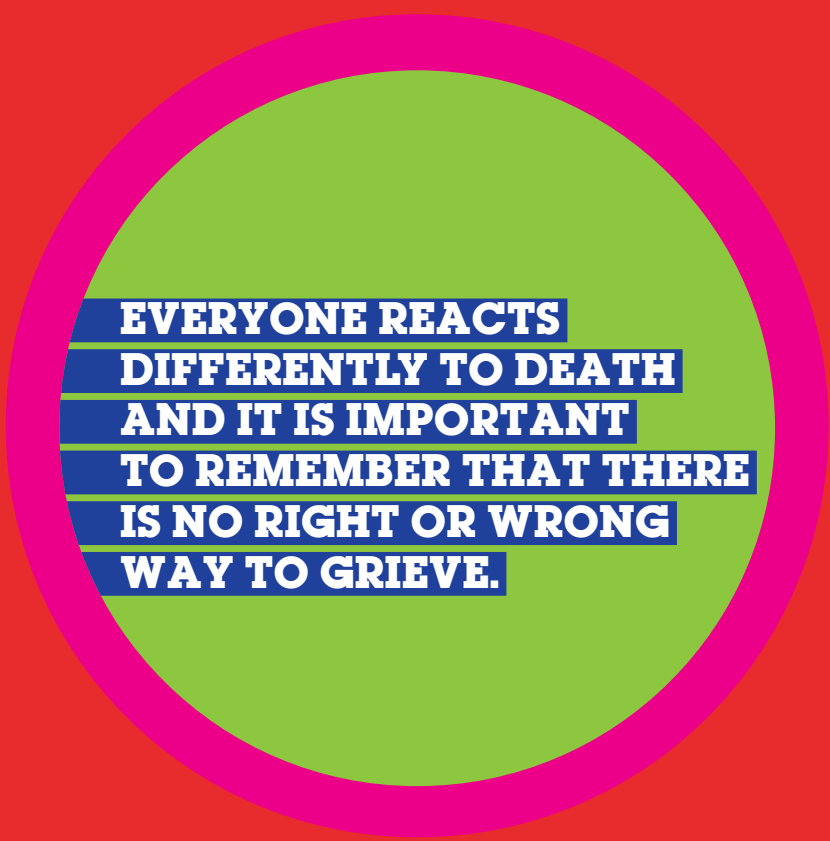
Everyone reacts differently to death and it is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. The way that you experience grief will be affected by the level of support you have. Many people speak of not having time to grieve when their attention is focused on parenting. It is vital that you seek and accept the support of others. If you are being supported you will be better able to support your children.

### Children of varying ages

You may be dealing with children of varying ages with different levels of understanding and reactions to the death. This can be challenging. Sometimes children seem to take turns – with one set of behaviours settling down just as another child seems to display others.

### Support for your approach

It is important when you have decided to tell children the truth about what has happened that this is relayed to the other significant adults in their lives. Carers, grandparents, schools and childminders can all be hugely helpful if they are consistent with the story and responses you have explained. You may receive mixed reaction from others about being so honest with young children about death and it is important that you are clear about how you want the story relayed and your child supported.



**EVERYONE REACTS  
DIFFERENTLY TO DEATH  
AND IT IS IMPORTANT  
TO REMEMBER THAT THERE  
IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG  
WAY TO GRIEVE.**

## SEEKING OUTSIDE SUPPORT

If after a period of time (3-6 months as a rough guide) the child continues to display signs of distress, for example night terrors, difficulty eating, socialising and separating, it may be useful to seek outside advice and support.

### Barnardos Children's Bereavement Service

Barnardos Children's Bereavement Service is a family support service for children and their families who have experienced the death of someone close to them. We can't shield children from the reality of death. We can't take away their pain or bring back their loved one. But we can help them to understand, to grieve and to cope a little better.

Children's grief can be immediate or delayed. They may experience denial, anger or guilt. They may feel confused and unable to make decisions. They can experience shock, numbness or physical aches and pains, or have difficulties eating, sleeping or concentrating. They may feel alone in the world, that they are forgotten or left out.

A particularly violent death – such as a murder or suicide – can have added traumatic impact. **Where a child has a traumatic response following a death an early intervention may be offered where appropriate.**

## Our service

It may take some time for a child to talk about death, but getting support and being listened to helps the healing. Barnardos Children's Bereavement Service is there to help. We work with families to help them increase their capacity to support their child through the grieving process.

Our project workers offer therapeutic bereavement support specific to the needs of each individual child and family. Our skilled and experienced staff also offer training and consultancy for groups and organisations working with children and families.

Our offices are located in Dublin and Cork. We also operate a National Helpline which is often the first step in seeking support by families and professionals.

Our Helpline number is: 01 – 4732110.

It is open Monday to Thursday, 10am to 12 noon.

Being a role model for your children's grief allows them to learn from you. Showing and explaining that it is ok to cry and feel sad will give them permission to do the same if needed. It also allows children to begin to gather the language to explain how they may be feeling.

## **READING RESOURCES**

### **The Invisible String**

by Patrice Karst

### **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death**

by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown

### **No Matter What**

by Debi Gliori

### **Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone has Died**

by Winston's Wish

### **A Terrible Thing Happened**

by Margaret M. Holmes

### **Waterbugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children**

by Doris Stickney

### **Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute**

by Elke Barber and Alex Barber

### **The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back**

by Margot Sunderland



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