

Guide for Primary Care: Supporting Children and Young People Experiencing Bereavement and Loss

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Key Messages

1. When children and young people get protection, comfort and the opportunity to process their experiences they can develop an adaptive response to traumatic events.
2. Most children and young people will best manage their grief through their normal support systems, though the initial stages of grief may well be very painful and disorganised.
3. Practitioners can offer support and advice both in preparation for and in response to families effected by grief.
4. The key intervention primary care can offer is a safe space for the family member to talk through their experience of grief, their worries and any other issues which have arisen due to the impact of the grief such as financial worries, sleep disturbance, alcohol / substance misuse, family and carer issues, depression, anxiety, health phobias, thoughts of self-harm, neglect. It is important to keep an open mind and curious stance as these stresses cut across all social groups.
5. Practitioners should offer watchful waiting and be vigilant for maladaptive responses from anyone within the household which could impact on a child's emotional wellbeing and safety.
6. Psychotherapeutic interventions are only recommended when there is a prolonged grief disorder or complex grief (e.g. due to multiple experiences of grief).
7. Special consideration should be made for the impact of the current COVID-19 measures on the families experience of grief – restricted hospital visiting, funeral arrangements, lack of contact with family and friends, loss of normal routines, loss of normal activities which improve emotional well-being and allow someone to psychologically extricate themselves from a situation i.e. have a different focus.
8. Additional support for children and young people should be considered where:
 - a. There are pre-existing mental health difficulties which have been exacerbated by bereavement
 - b. You identify risky coping behaviours

- c. Parents/ carers appear to be coping with bereavement in unhealthy ways
- d. Where the primary concern is mental health and has a major impact on activities of daily life over an extended period (over 3 months)

Under these circumstances consider the primary cause of concern to decide the most appropriate referral pathway: Social Care. Early Help or CAMHS.

9. Advice for parents and further signposting below

Children and young people's experience of bereavement and loss

There is no right way to grieve. Children's reactions depend on their age and developmental level, and the emotional availability of their support system to acknowledge and process their feelings. It might well be the case that those the child relies on for this support are too overwhelmed by their own experience of grief. Therefore, it is important to establish who else is available within the child's support network including extended family, friends, and any other reliable adults such as school staff.

'Puddle jumping' – It can be helpful to understand children and young people's response to grief as 'puddle jumping', in which children experience sudden strong overwhelming emotions ('jumping in') and then switch their attention ('jumping out'). They will go in and out of these puddles throughout the day in the early stages of grief, the frequency gradually declining as the grief is processed – though of course any significant events can trigger a grief response for years to come.

Complex emotions and behaviour – Grief may bring about a complex mix of emotions and behaviours including anger, anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, fear and guilt to mention a few. Children may also 'clam up', finding it hard to say anything and feel confused themselves as to how they feel.

Guilt – Children and young people may feel that the death was somehow their fault.

Regression – Sometimes children, and even adolescents, will revert to behaviours typical of younger children as they seek out the safety and comfort of earlier stages from which to confront the terrible reality of their loss.

How to help

- The most valuable thing you can do is listen, with seriousness, empathy and an open and curious mind to the parents' / carers' concerns - in so doing so you are helping the parents / carers think through their concerns, open up about other stresses which may be impacting on the family and offering 'containment' to the parents'/carers' worries about their distressed child. You may then in turn help them to 'contain' their child's anxieties and distress.
- Try to help parents/carers to understand that the reactions their child is having, whilst distressing and possibly confusing, are also very normal and understandable. Also try to help them understand that this distress usually passes over time, and is the process of making sense of the change, adjusting to and mourning the loss. Of course, be mindful that some children may need extra support (as outlined on previous page).
- Encourage parents/carers to listen carefully to their child, to help the child think things through, to better understand their feelings and behaviours and think about the support they need.
- Advise parents/carers to use direct and simple language appropriate to their child's emotional level, for example use the word 'death' rather than phrases like 'loss', 'gone to a better place', 'journey' or 'a long sleep'. Whilst such phrases are intended to protect children and ourselves, it can be unhelpful as children understand them literally.
- It might be helpful to meet with the whole family to help explain in child focused language the cause of death and answer any questions so that the child has clarity about the situation and to dispel any concerns they may have of being to blame.
- Advise parents/carers to consider the experiences from the child's perspective, for example they may be feeling guilty if they had a complicated relationship with the person who died or had an upsetting conversation before the person died?
- Talk openly about the process of grief for the whole family and how they can best support each other, recognising that children and young people may feel they need to protect their parents/carers from hearing about their distress if they are worried it will add to the parents/carers emotional burden.
- Advise parents/carers briefly about funeral arrangements within current restrictions and encourage them to consider how their child can be part of saying goodbye/mark the person's death which may include age appropriate rituals.
- Encourage them to consider creating memory items with their child, such as memory boxes or photo albums.

Advice for parents and carers for children and young people experiencing bereavement and loss

Your relationship is the most important part. Although it can be incredibly difficult to bear, children need to go through a process of bereavement which means that they will experience lots of difficult emotions. At this time, it is not usually specialist help that is needed, but support from the child's normal key relationships. It is only much further down the line if a child is struggling to adjust and it is impacting on their functioning that we may think about whether specialist services are needed.

Look after yourself – this is tough, be kind to yourself. Make sure you have a good support system to support you in your grief so you can be emotionally available to your child. If you are struggling, be honest with yourself and your child so they understand, and think about what extra support you need.

Acknowledge what has happened and how your child is feeling Help your child understand that what they are feeling is to be expected. Truly listen and acknowledge how they are feeling. Hold back any temptation to rush in and fix problems or reassure - they need you to listen so they can talk it through.

'Puddle jumping' It can be helpful to understand your child's response to grief as 'puddle jumping', in which they experience sudden overwhelming emotions ('jumping in') and then switch their attention ('jumping out'). If you see your child looking lost, alone, struggling to concentrate or becoming agitated it could be that they have 'jumped into a puddle of grief'. Acknowledge how you think they may be feeling, offer physical comfort and help them to express themselves by letting them know you are available and want to help them.

Share your own feelings By sharing your feelings with your child, you can help them better understand the situation and understand that difficult feelings are part of grieving. When sharing your feelings, try to do it in a way that doesn't overwhelm your child or suggest that you are relying on them for your emotional comfort.

Use clear language Use direct and simple language appropriate to your child's emotional level, for example use the word 'death' rather than phrases like 'loss', 'gone to a better place', 'journey' or 'a long sleep'. Whilst such phrases are intended to protect children and ourselves, it can be unhelpful as children understand them literally.

Difficult questions If you are faced with a difficult question, rather than answering straight away, ask the child what they think.

Keep connected Offer regular check ins with your child and recognise the times they do not want to talk, as well as the times they do. Younger children may express themselves through play and it is helpful for you to just be there to acknowledge what they are saying or doing. With older children it's sometimes easier to have conversations when you are side by side, on a car journey for example.

Nurture Sometimes you and your child will just need a cuddle; touch can help our bodies and minds to feel calmer.

Give them an item that offers comfort Your child may find it soothing to have something they can carry in their pocket e.g. a piece of fabric, a stone or a small toy. You may want to talk with your child about whether they want to create memory items such as memory boxes or photo albums.

Provide opportunities for them to communicate how they are feeling Using diaries, artwork, music or pretend play materials can help children and young people notice, acknowledge and understand their emotions.

Provide opportunities to take a break from grief Your child will benefit from shifting their focus from their grief to other activities which are fun and absorbing.

Return to normal routines Engaging in normal or familiar routines where possible can help your child to feel more safe and secure. Talk with them about how ready they feel to return to normal routines.

Keep an open mind They might be feeling upset or frustrated due to other reasons such as normal day to day concerns that can easily be resolved. They may be struggling with more complex concerns due to the impact of the loss on the family, including parental mental health issues, family financial worries, alcohol or substance misuse, feeling out of step with friends, or people being awkward around them.

Inform the wider support network including school Tell your child who they can turn to in school or family and friends if they want help. This can be especially useful if your child is worried about burdening you. Make sure to let these people know you have identified them in this way so they can let you know of concerns.

Inform their peer group People can get very awkward around those who are grieving as they are anxious about saying the wrong thing and making things worse. It may help to talk to them about what is more and less helpful. You may want to include your child in this conversation or ask them what they want others to do.

Think ahead to trigger points It is not always possible but try to hold in mind that certain dates, events and even schoolwork may trigger strong emotions.

When a child needs more support

There are no limits to how long grieving should last or what it should look like. Most children will go through a process that leads to them adjusting to life without the person that has died. However, a small number of children may struggle to cope with the emotional impact of their grief and possibly develop unhelpful ways of coping that may mean that they may need a little more support.

It may be cause to worry if your child develops a prolonged reduced interest in daily activities, appears withdrawn, is not sleeping or eating, has started to engage in behaviours such as self-harm or are getting into lots of fights

If you do become concerned please speak to your GP.

Further resources and support

Winstons Wish: Offer support to children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling
www.winstonswish.org/

Child Bereavement UK: Supporting bereaved children and young people
www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people

Young Minds: Supporting your child with grief and loss
<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-grief-and-loss/>

How to talk so kids will listen and listen to kids will talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish is a valuable book to support parents' communication with their children.

NHS Every Minds Matters: Offers tips and advice to look after your mental health
www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/

Helplines

- ▶ **The Listening Ear – 0800 048 5224 Monday to Friday 10am – 5pm is a regional service**
- ▶ **Child Bereavement UK - 0800 028 8840 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm**
- ▶ **Hope Again - 0808 808 1677 Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5pm**
- ▶ **Winston's Wish - 0808 802 0021 Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm**
- ▶ **Sheffield Wellbeing Support Line for Young People (12 – 18 years old) - 0808 275 8892. Monday to Sunday 9am to 9pm.**