

Bereavement - Guidance for Parents

How best to support children within our community who have suffered a bereavement.

Tina from Phoenix Bereavement has helped us to draw together key suggestions as to how we support children, from the guidance of Child Bereavement UK (tel. 0800 028 8840), Phoenix Bereavement Hereford (01432 264555) and St Michael's Hospice. This information has been written with input from real children and their real experiences. It may be something you dip into every now and again.

How can we help? What do we do? What do we say? No-one has all the answers and all may seem inadequate; there is no right or wrong way. Simply be there with more hugs and make more time to listen, if they want to talk. They may not want to talk at all; they may not have the words. They will be trying to process things in their own minds. We have to be led by the wishes and needs of the children.

Ideas from a young person who has lost a friend.

- Remember to eat well, get as much sleep as possible, exercise and relax.
- Talk if you want to, but only when you feel you can. Not everybody wants to talk to begin with and that's OK.
- Cry if you need to. Bottling up the tears and feelings, can make you ill. Although, some people may not cry at all- that is OK too. Sometimes tears are just not ready to come out.
- It is normal not to feel normal (to feel a mix of emotions). Sometimes we feel angry, sad and sometimes we can't explain how we feel.
- Carry on with your normal routines; school, meeting with friends (perhaps meet up even more), clubs, do something that makes you feel better.
- Talk to people who understand and who knew the person. Share your treasured moments: happy and special times.
- Celebrate that you were lucky enough to have had the person in your life.
- Ask for lots of hugs.
- Take deep breaths; relax through yoga.

- Write down your feelings or thoughts on pieces of paper, and either store them in a little box, tie them to a special tree or screw up and throw away. Do what makes you feel better.
- Keep a diary where you can write down anything that comes to you - a poem, thoughts, song lyrics or stick photos in it. Look through it when you are feeling sad.
- Talk to the person you have lost, either out loud or in your head. You could even write a letter to say how you're feeling.
- It's OK not to think sad feelings all the time. We are children who still need to have fun and think good thoughts.

What do grieving children need?

- Please do not feel that they need to be rescued, immediately. At an early stage, anything they say or do will be normal.
- Giving even more reassurance that they are loved and safe.
- Giving quality time so that talking if they want to is more natural. Children do not like to feel under pressure to express powerful emotions; just let them know you are there for them. A shared activity takes off the pressure, perhaps taking the dog for a walk or playing a game can be a time when they start to share worries, thoughts and feelings.
- Reassurance, understanding of their wishes and feelings and open helpful information and conversation from family, friends and school.
- For us all to carry on as much as we can with the usual normal routines of home, school, time with friends and so on, to increase a child's feelings of security. If a child seems to need time away from school, it can be harder to return. It may be that they need more reassurance that a parent, grandparent, sibling will be there for them at the end of the day.
- Try to keep to the usual behaviour boundaries, but with understanding and patience - this will help them to feel safe.
- Being there to support when the grief feels overwhelming. With these things in place, most children will not need further professional help, way in the future. However, we all need to monitor carefully.

Information

It is very important to think through the language that you are going to use with your children. Using terms such as 'lost', 'gone', 'passed away', 'went away', 'gone to sleep' will cause a different set of fears, uncertainty and confusion. An honest statement such as, '... has died.' The child may ask, 'Is this going to happen to me?' We remove that fear with explanation and how to keep ourselves safe.

How can I help my child to express their feelings?

Children grieve just as deeply as adults, but can show it in different ways. Sometimes it will manifest in difficult behaviour because they do not have the communication skills to express how they feel. Sometimes they will not be able to recognise their feelings but will just know that they feel different. Some may not be able to put how they feel into words. They acquire the language of feelings from us. Showing your sadness will encourage them to express theirs. This is helpful, as bottling up difficult emotions can make people ill and behave with anger, or experience depression later in life. Equally, showing that life can carry on, although, a different life, is also helpful.

We all react in different ways. It's OK to feel different feelings at different times - shock, fear, numb, lonely, exhausted, nothing at all, sad, distress, pain, anger, guilt, regret, confusion, of wanting to hide, of wanting to carry on with normal routines. IT IS ALSO OK TO FEEL HAPPY AND TO ENJOY THINGS. All feelings are normal and part of the healing process.

'Puddle jumping'

If they feel the need to cry, they must, as it forms part of the healing process. If they do not feel the need to cry, that is OK too (it does not mean that they are not hurting). Children dip in and out of grief, called 'puddle jumping'. They can be intensely sad one minute, then switch to playing happily the next. This is OK. It is a type of built in safety mechanism that prevents them being overwhelmed by emotions.

Some friends may seemingly move on quickly - that's fine. Other friends may feel that their life has been turned upside down and may need more support. They will be fine, as surrounded by love, and loved ones. Powerful feelings ebb and flow and hit at different times. Sometimes feelings of grief may come along in days, months, even years in the future. It will be important to recognise those feelings and seek support from family, friends, school and professionals (if necessary).

The funeral service

What you say or do is your choice based on your beliefs and what feels right for your child. Tina suggests that it is important to talk to your child about whether or not they would like to attend. But if they have not experienced a funeral before, they need to be prepared for what is going to happen and what they will see. Some children may expect to see the person who has died at their funeral.

They can find a funeral a helpful experience, a way of saying goodbye. Your child will guide you - they may decide to go and then back out at the door or part way through the service - just hold them close and walk away, giving them quiet time.

A suggestion of what to say... A funeral is a special ceremony where we get together to remember ..., to think about how much we loved them and to say goodbye. At the funeral, ... will be in a special box called a coffin. The coffin will have a lid on it and ...'s body will be safe inside. We will sing some hymns. Some people get very sad, some people cry a little bit, a lot or not at all. It doesn't matter who does what. Some of you may want to leave with your child after the service, as the burial can be particularly difficult and will need adequate preparation.

The burial

If they attend the burial, they will need to know that the coffin will be lowered into the ground and covered with soil. They may have very difficult questions that will need to be answered at this point or later, when thinking about what has happened during the day.

There are recognised stages of grieving, but each person's grief is different. They may come in a different order and at different times

- Denial - our body protects itself with a sense of not believing, numbness, calm and detachment.
- Anger - giving the message that it is OK for them to be angry is what they need to hear. However, they need to know that it is not acceptable to hurt themselves or others, when angry. Phoenix use throwing wet sponges at outside walls, shouting loudly outside, vigorous physical exercise, messy painting sessions and so on, to reduce anger.
- Bargaining - looking at the 'What if I ...', 'Could I have ...', 'I will be kinder from now on.' 'I need to look after myself better.'
- Depression - grieving takes time and energy, but has to run its course. Seek help from the GP, if it all feels too much.
- Acceptance - nothing is the same after bereavement. We are not betraying our loved ones when we learn to adapt and live with hope. Our hope is to be able to cope with daily life and to keep the bond with the person who has died in our hearts and our heads. A little bit of them is within us. We are better people for having had them in our lives and we can take them with us wherever we go in the years ahead.