

Introduction

It is a sad fact that many young people will experience the death of a member of the family, a friend or someone close to them. As parents and carers you may find it particularly difficult to help your child, especially if the death is of someone close to you as well. We hope to be able to provide a few suggestions to help you understand your child's responses and find ways of helping him or her through the normal stages of grief.

Reactions to Bereavement and Loss

Children of all ages will experience feelings of grief and may be said to mourn, just as adults do. However, your child's understanding of and response to death may vary with age. Children below the age of 7 may not understand the concept of death, or its finality. Children aged 7 to 10 years become aware of the finality of death. By the age of 11, most children have a more adult understanding of death.

How do Children Grieve?

Grief is a normal, essential response to the death of a loved one. It can last for a short while or continue over a period of months or years. Whereas adult grief tends to be ongoing, a child's grief may appear to come and go. For adults and children grief has several stages. These are:-

Shock and disbelief	a feeling of numbness, apathy, possibly withdrawal.
Denial	refusal to accept a person is dead.
Growing Awareness	may be accompanied by surges of intense feeling e.g. guilt, anger, depression, sadness, fear, anxiety.
Acceptance	this may not occur until the second year or later following the death.

How Feelings Affect Behaviour

You may notice some of the following responses. These are normal, provided they do not go on for too long, or cause extremes of distress:-

- Increased misbehaviour, aggression and more immature behaviour.
- Silence and withdrawn behaviour — reluctance to talk.
- Sleep disturbance including bad dreams, fear of being alone or in the dark.
- Excessive "clinging" — wanting to sleep with parents or carers.
- Changes in appetite.
- Fears for their own safety or that of family and friends.
- Being easily upset by everyday events.
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, toileting accidents.
- Unwillingness to go to school or to go out with friends.

How to Help

You may be grieving for that person too, but the following should help:-

- Try not to hide your own feelings from your child. It can even be helpful for your child to see you are upset, rather than pretending everything is normal. Explain in simple terms that everyone gets upset by death.
- Try to allow your child opportunities to talk about feelings and about the person who died. Let them know it's OK for them to cry, however old they are.
- Be ready to listen — but don't expect your child to be ready to talk. Hugs, sharing activities and giving your child time will provide reassurance.
- Acknowledge feelings which may include anger and guilt as well as sorrow. If your child says it's his/her fault that someone died, be prepared to discuss this and resist phrases such as "you'll soon feel better".

- Try to answer questions as honestly and accurately as you can in words your child will understand. If possible, use the words 'death' and 'died'. Phrases such as 'passed away' or 'gone away' can be confusing.
- Maintain routines such as bedtimes, meals or going to normal activities such as Cubs. These all help provide a sense of security.
- Expect your child to go to school. Familiar situations and maintaining friendships are important.
- Ask that a few friends are told and are guided about how to help.
- People - young or old, often find it difficult to respond to bereaved friends.
- Attending the funeral or cremation may be an important part of the grieving process, especially if the rest of the family are going. You know your child best so do consider whether he or she would be helped by being there and how he or she might feel later on if they had not been there. Ask you child about this.
- If your child's responses are intense, persist over a long period of time, or prevent your child returning to a normal way of life, then you may need to seek extra help. Your GP will be a source of support.

Looking After Yourself

There are no easy answers — talking about and coping with death are some of the most difficult things we ever have to do. Caring for a bereaved child can be especially distressing — so do remember to take the time to talk to your family and friends about your own feelings.

Useful Contact Numbers

Cruse: 0117 926 4045; www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Winston's Wish: 0845 20 30 40 5; www.winstonswish.org.uk

Supporting children through bereavement and loss

A guide for parents and carers

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