

NOTES FOR PARENTS/CARERS OF BEREAVED CHILDREN

The first two pages provide some brief notes for parents and carers, pages 3-6 list the needs of bereaved children, page 7 gives some thoughts bereaved pupils have had about school and page 8 provides details of other sources of information and support.

When a death affects a family it is difficult for everyone. As a parent/carer of a bereaved child you may be struggling to deal with your own feelings and thoughts as well as the practical consequences of the death. You will know your own family and child better than anyone else and will need to find the best way to support them through the death. These notes aim to provide a few key points to help you think through the best way to support your child/ren in the early stages following a death.

Children benefit from being **included** as much as possible. This means children need to be given clear age appropriate information about the death and the rituals and ceremonies that may follow. Sometimes, for instance at a funeral, it may feel hard to look after a child as well as cope with your own feelings. In this case it may help to have someone else the child knows and likes be there for them.

Bereaved children often feel anxious when someone has died, **keeping to familiar routines and carers** can help provide reassurance and reduce anxiety.

It also helps children to be given clear undivided attention. Though this may be difficult it is really helpful if it is possible. With a quiet undisturbed space it may be much easier to listen to a child and provide them with the information and comfort that they need.

Every one is different, but most children, especially younger children, benefit from hugs or cuddles, which can be very important at this time. You will know your own child best.

Evidence shows that children benefit from being able to talk about the person who has died, the illness or events which have caused the death, as well as other thoughts and feelings they may have. Finding ways to be open and honest about what has happened really helps. This does not mean having to share every detail of what has happened or all your thoughts and feelings. If you are concerned about how to talk about a particular issue you are welcome to call The Laura Centre and a counsellor will call you back, or you may like to look at the useful websites and contacts page at the end of these notes. It is important to remember that if children are told something that turns out to be untrue it will undermine trust.

Sometimes children may try to comfort you or distract you if you are upset. It is useful to reassure them and help them learn about grief. For example by saying things like "I am very upset and sad because 'name of person' died... though it is hard and hurts it helps to let our pain out....I can't talk more right now because I am so upset but will be able to talk later". Over time it helps a child to know that we can cope with even the most difficult and painful feelings.

Understanding and support at different ages

Every child develops an understanding of death in their own unique way at their own pace. The needs of bereaved children (pages 3-6) are relevant to all ages.

Under 5-s:

Babies and toddlers will generally not understand the concept of death – though they will be affected by the absence of an important figure in their life. They are also sensitive to the emotions and behaviours of others.

At the older end of this age range children may start to understand something of what ‘dead’ means, though they may still struggle to realize it is permanent.

It is particularly important in younger children to keep to reassuring and familiar routines wherever possible. Verbal and physical affection may be very important. They may need repeated answers to questions to help understand what has happened. Keep language and explanations as simple and clear as possible.

6 and 7 year olds

This can be a transitional age where children may appear to understand about life and death but may have incomplete or confusing thoughts. It is important to be especially alert to signs of confusion or anxiety at this stage. Children at this age may be more likely to have nightmares if there is something worrying them. Repeated honest reassurance and information may be helpful.

8-11 year olds

Most children of this age are able to understand the finality of death. There may still be issues in understanding what caused a death – sometimes confusion about this can lead to feeling anxious about other people dying.

12 years plus

In general children and young people of this age have a similar understanding about death to adults. However they may have had less life experience to be able to make sense of what has happened and their own feelings. Sometimes they may be too self-conscious to ask things – or they may ‘not know’ what they do not know.

The actions and attitude of those around children and young people will communicate messages to them about death and grief. It can be helpful to reflect on what messages we give them, as well as sharing important information to help with their understanding it is important to also communicate:

- That you care about their thoughts and feelings.
- Use the words ‘dead’ or ‘died’ to help a child understand what has happened, other expressions (e.g. ‘gone to sleep’ or ‘taken by Jesus’) can be confusing or frightening.
- We are all affected by grief and loss and though painful we can cope with it.
- Reassurance – both through tone of voice and word.
- That despite the loss much of life continues as it did before, and it is good to continue daily activities, interests and friendships.
- Some of your own feelings and thoughts in a way that they can understand – this can help them to make sense of their own experience and to feel less alone

THE NEEDS OF BEREAVED CHILDREN

Following the Harvard Bereavement Study, William Worden identified ten needs of bereaved children, these are listed below with brief notes. The same needs apply to children of all ages, the notes below are written with younger children in mind. Additional notes about how these apply to teenagers are available from the Laura Centre website (at bottom of page 'Support for Parent/Carers) or we can send them if you do not have internet access.

1. Adequate information.

Children need clear information, given in age-appropriate language, for instance, "He's died" – rather than phrases such as "We've lost him". It is important to give enough information without overwhelming a child. Sometimes the honest answer to a child's question may be "I don't know", or "I can't tell you just now".

Sometimes with traumatic death (suicide or murder) it may help to provide information in stages over weeks, months or even years. Giving simple facts at first (e.g. "Daddy died last night"), can be followed with more information later, perhaps prompted by the child's questions.

Some key aspects of death may need to be repeatedly explained to younger children; in particular the finality of death, the fact that it is irreversible, and that people who are dead feel no cold, hunger or pain.

Some families have spiritual or religious beliefs about death. If talking about these matters, it is helpful to separate out what happens to someone's body and their soul or spirit. It is important to respect the child and family's views.

If at all possible, it is helpful for children to be given some preparation if someone close to them has a terminal illness.

2. Fears and anxieties addressed.

It is a natural reaction to feel frightened following a death. Children may particularly fear that a surviving parent (or carer) will die or that they may die themselves. Sometimes lack of understanding about a particular death, or death in general, may exacerbate fears. Fears are often worst at night, especially at bedtime or at other times of separation (e.g. going to school, staying at someone else's house). Giving the child something to look after, or something to look forward to, helps them to understand that the separation will be short.

It is important to reassure wherever possible, but equally it is important to be truthful. For example, a bereaved child who asks a surviving parent, "Will you die?", will not easily accept a statement which offers false certainty, such as, "No, of course not." This child already knows that parents can die, maybe in sudden and shocking ways. However, a suggestion that the surviving parent will probably live a long time ("Look at Grandma, she is 87!") and

sharing plans about who would care for them in the unlikely event of early death can be reassuring.

Clear accurate information helps to reduce fears - for example, talking about dad dying from a brain tumour and explaining how this is different to feeling poorly and having a headache.

3. Reassurance they are not to blame

Young children are still learning the difference between things that they caused to happen and things that had nothing to do with them. For example they naturally experience extremes of emotion and may connect an earlier angry tantrum with someone's death. It may be necessary to give them clear, repeated messages that they are not to blame.

4. Careful listening and watching

We all show our thoughts and feelings in many ways, not just by what we say. Children may express their feelings through their play, behaviour and the way they relate to others. Maybe they do not do things they always used to enjoy, or it seems very important to do something that 'daddy' did. Or they go very quiet at a particular time. Or they make a big fuss about something that might appear insignificant.

Sometimes it can be helpful to find out what is behind a question. For instance, if a child asked: "What happened to John when he died?". It might be worth saying: "I wonder what you think?" The child's answer to this question may reveal more precisely what he wanted to know as well as helping him to find his own answers. This question might be about what caused his death, the physical changes in the body following his death, a spiritual question about his soul or something else entirely.

5. Validation of Individuals' feelings

The Harvard bereavement study found that 2 years after death one quarter of the children had been admonished for not showing enough feeling, whereas another quarter were told they should have finished grieving. This latter group included children who reported high levels of crying into the second year (Worden).

Allow for individual differences both in feelings and in the expression of feelings. There is no one way to grieve, in fact there are as many ways to grieve, as there are people.

It is important to let a bereaved adult or child know that the death, however painful, is something they can talk about. However, it is not helpful to make comments like: "I know how you feel", "You've got to be brave", or "You should try and forget it", or "At least you've

got another sister". These all have the effect of stopping any real conversation about what has happened, and denying the reality of the loss.

Sometimes validating a feeling, especially feelings of despair or deep pain, help us to move through those feelings, at least temporarily. When we believe it is not OK to feel something our feelings can get locked away inside us. This can make them harder to deal with and may lead to difficulties in later life.

6. Help with overwhelming feelings

We all sometimes need to protect ourselves from difficult or painful feelings. Sometimes young children want to pretend that something awful has not happened, or at least forget about it for a while. It is important to respect this need at the same time as providing an environment that encourages confidence in our natural capacity to deal with difficult emotions.

Sometimes children will feel very angry, destructive, anxious, or withdrawn.

Carers need to balance children's need for consistent boundaries and expectations about their behaviour, with an acceptance that they may be less capable than you would ordinarily expect from a child of their age. For instance they may temporarily go backwards with potty training or dressing themselves.

Being alongside a child in play or other activity may provide opportunities to help them express their feelings. For example, "Teddy's feeling really cross because his mummy's died and he can't see her again."

7. Involvement and inclusion.

It is important to involve children in acknowledging and commemorating a death. This may include visiting a sick person before death, seeing the body after death, their involvement in the funeral and their opinions about memorials. Seeing how the death affects their family and friends will help them to feel less alone.

Even where families have clearly defined choices or traditions around death, a child may still be able to contribute something to a funeral or memorial.

8. Continued Routine Activities

Children benefit from being able to continue routine, previously enjoyed activities and interests. It is sometimes hard for adults to see children wanting to carry on with things so soon after a death (e.g. going to football training). It is natural for children to dip in and out of grief, and just as adults need to carry on with the normal routines of daily life (making meals, cleaning the house etc.), so children need to play.

Play may naturally include re-enactment of events surrounding the death or illness.

It is especially important following traumatic loss to provide as much stability and continuity as possible. The death of someone close is often very frightening. The child needs familiar activities and people to help them realise that, though life will never be the same, there are still many things that remain constant.

9. Modelled grief behaviours

“Children learn how to mourn by observing mourning behaviour in adults.” (Worden p.145).

Through sharing our own experience we can provide repeated opportunities for a child to make sense of and share their own feelings. It is important to be true to ourselves and open about our own feelings. At the same time it is important to be sensitive to a child's needs when talking to them. You may have complicated and difficult thoughts and feelings that are not appropriate to share; however you may still be able to share enough for a child to understand that you are feeling upset because of the death and that your mood is nothing to with them.

Adults can promote an environment where it is easy to talk about the deceased and to acknowledge good and bad memories.

When talking about such things it is natural to feel sad. It is also important to acknowledge anger, guilt and fear, but to do this in a way that does not overwhelm the child.

10. Opportunities to remember.

When someone who played a significant part in a child's life dies there will be countless moments when the child is reminded of their absence. When a family is able to speak about the deceased naturally, it helps a child to make sense of their own reality. At the same time it is important to respect that any individual may need to protect themselves from pain at times, and a child may not want to talk about the deceased.

Sometimes when significant events are coming up, like anniversaries, Christmas, or other festivals, it is useful to plan in advance how the day will be spent. Families have found it helpful to do something in memory of the deceased at the beginning of special days, for example, looking at photos and talking about the person who has died. Such times can also be a good opportunity to remind children that it is OK to have fun, perhaps by saying something like: “I'm sure Mummy would want you to enjoy today as much as possible, though we are bound to feel sad when we are missing her.”

Very young children who never met their deceased parent or sibling may not feel the need to ask questions about them – but older ones will. And as teenagers develop their own identity, it is helpful for them to have a sense of where they come from. It is much less painful for children to grow up with this knowledge than for them suddenly to find out later on.

Schools and children and young people

Bereaved pupils say....

- Inform other teachers, especially supply teachers about my loss although I may not wish to talk to them about it. Keep this on record.
- Talk to me about what has happened. I may need more information, advice and education about loss.
- Arrange for me to get extra help with my work so I don't get behind, especially before exams.
- Realise that I have a lot on my plate. Try not to put the spotlight on me too much. I will participate when I can.
- Help me to cope by treating me the same as everyone else.
- Let me know about groups for children and young people who are also coping with loss and change.
- Ask me how I am feeling. It may not be obvious.
- Give me a note that allows me permission to leave class briefly, without having to explain myself if I feel overwhelmed.
- Understand that I will not 'get over it' or 'put it behind me' but with time I will learn to cope with all the changes.
- Give me extra encouragement for all the things I am managing to do and keep me in mind.
- Find a way of getting my attention back in class, without others noticing and making me embarrassed.
- Wait until I am ready to talk.
- Remember that I am still me, just feeling a bit lost at the moment.
- Help me to find new dreams of the future and make plans.

(Reproduced from Childhood Bereavement Network website, developed in partnership with young people in Scotland working with Seasons for Growth peer support programme)

USEFUL ORGANISATIONS / WEBSITES

Child Bereavement UK

Their website has articles, information and user forums covering a wide range of issues for professionals, parents/carers and young people. The section for schools includes guidance on school policy, support for young people and introducing death and loss in the curriculum www.childbereavement.org.uk . Tel: 01494 568900

Good information for parents/carers and professionals.

The Childhood Bereavement Network

This has a directory of services throughout the UK that offer support to bereaved children. www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk as well as other information and resources (including postcards to help children explain needs to school or others) Tel: 0207 843 6054

Good for professionals, resources and to find support across the UK.

Grief Encounter

Their website has message boards for children (click on 'Kids Zone') and young people ('Teen Zone') – www.griefencounter.org.uk. **Good for children and Young people**

Rd4u

CRUSE bereavement care has an interactive area for children and young people called **rd4u** (the 'Road for you'), this includes sections with information for all ages, message boards, a fun zone, as well as an area for 'lads only' – www.rd4u.org.uk

Good for children and Young people

The Laura Centre

The **Laura Centre** website has details of the Laura Centre service, local training courses for school and other professionals as well as downloadable Frequently Asked Questions and other resources (e.g. needs of bereaved children).

www.thelauracentre.org.uk . Tel: 0116 254-4341.

Good for parents/carers and professionals

Winston's Wish

Winston's Wish's website has extensive resources for parents/carers and schools as well as many areas for children young people. This includes guidance on how to talk to children about a range of topics including causes of death, serious illness and funerals. There are lists of books and other resources for all subjects and some dvds, films that can be viewed directly from the site. There are also ways of making a memorial.

www.winstonswish.org.uk or you can call their Helpline on **0845 20 30 40 5**

Excellent for children and young people, parents/carers and professionals.