



Supporting children following a bereavement: a guide for parents and carers

Rochdale educational psychology service



The death of a relative, friend or someone you know is always a difficult experience for people to deal with. This is the same for young people and the adults around them can find it hard to know how best to help, especially when they are likely grieving too.

Normal responses to a bereavement

After a young person has been bereaved those spending time with the child might notice changes in their mood, behaviours and interactions.

The way young people cope with a bereavement will be individual and it is important to know that the vast majority of changes are completely normal.

Physical changes

A young person might suffer more aches and pains, as well as being generally more fatigued. Changes in sleep and eating patterns are also common.

Changes to mood and feelings

Young people will often feel sad and depressed. They may also feel guilty about what has happened or fear that they might lose somebody else. These feelings and emotions might change quite quickly and can cause irritability, long periods of being upset and emotional outbursts that may be challenging for the adults around them.

Changes in behaviour

The young person may do certain things that remind the adults around them of younger children. They may take on the role of the deceased person, using their mannerisms and wearing their clothes. The young person may act more aggressively and do things that are socially inappropriate or involve a high level of risk.

Change in interests

People might notice a change in how many activities the young person is doing, that they no longer enjoy things they used to and that they have become isolated from their peers.

Changes in school

The young person may become indifferent to school work, have difficulty on concentrating and seem to focus on death when completing seemingly unrelated activities.



What can help?

Encourage the expression of feelings

Provide time and space for talking about loss and how they feel. Help the young person label the emotions they might be having and reassure them that it's OK and normal to feel like they do. Use outside resources, such as books, for explanations and discussions of feelings.

Maintain routines and provide sense of safety

Make sure the young person knows who is looking after them and try to keep this consistent, secure and stable. Try to maintain as much of their normal routine as possible.

Encourage supportive friendships and social networks

Encourage sharing thoughts and feelings in persons outside of the family. Let the young person's friends know how they are doing and encourage them to keep inviting the young person to things they would typically go to.

Teach coping skills

Help young people plan for what they might say if asked about what has happened, talk about what they would like different people to know and how possible this is. Schedule and allow for fun activities. Help the child remember and think positively of the person who has died.



Model good coping strategies such as talking to others about feelings, seeking help when needed and taking care of yourself.

Tune in to the child's experience and signs of distress

Be aware of the story that a young person might have regarding their role in the death of a loved one and reinforce that they are not at fault. Monitor how they are engaging with their social and academic activities. Be patient when their mood and behaviour changes quickly. Answer their questions honestly.

Try to instil hope for the young person

Let the young person know that the range of feelings they might have are normal and ok. Reassure them that the strength of these feelings will fade over time. Talk to the young person about what they would usually do to feel a bit better when they are sad and help them to follow some normal routines if they feel able to. Encourage the young person to think of those people/things they still have even though a person special to them has died. Support the young person to continue to connect with others through chatting, play or other activities.

Activities that you and your child could do together

Below are some small activities and events that can be offered to a young person as a way of helping them grieve and allow adults to support them during this process.

Creative activities

Writing letters or poems to the person who has died. Creating things to remember them, such as drawings, photo collages or memory boxes. Keeping a diary or journal of how they feel.

Outdoor activities

Visiting places where they and the person who has died spent happy times together. Taking flowers, pictures and letters to put on the grave and allowing the young person some time to talk privately with the person. Taking part in sponsored events that supported or were important to the person who died.

Remembrance activities

Marking anniversaries and special dates related to the person who died. Having a space especially for remembering the person. Planting a tree or shrub in their memory. Attending events that were important to the person who died.

Books

Books can be a good way for young people to understand more about how they might be feeling, give them the language to talk about what has happened and feel more hopeful about the future.

Early years and key stage 1

'Badgers Parting Gifts' by Susan Varley,
'Luna's Red Hat' by Emmi Smid

Key stage 2 and 3

'A Library of Lemons' by Jo Cotterill,
'Vicky Angel' by Jacqueline Wilson

Primary age children may also benefit from 'When Someone Very Special Dies' by Marge Heegaard, in which children create their own illustrations while learning about grief and encouraging open communication.

Adolescents

'Monster Calls' by Patrick Ness,
'My Sister Lives on the Mantelpiece'
by Annabel Pitcher

Websites with more information and support

The following websites provide further information and support for adults and young people who have been bereaved.

Child Bereavement UK
childbereavementuk.org/

Rochdale Community Champions
rochdale.gov.uk/jobs-and-training/volunteering/Pages/community-champions.aspx

Hope Again (Cruse Bereavement Care)
hopeagain.org.uk/

Winston's Wish (for bereaved children)
winstonswish.org/



For further information please contact the team at:

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