

Supporting Bereaved Families During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic



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Cardiff Educational Psychology Service

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During to the global COVID-19 pandemic, we are facing a tragic loss of life, often under very difficult circumstances. A bereavement from COVID-19 is likely to be very challenging and it is really important that people bereaved by COVID-19 are cared for and receive appropriate support. This document has been developed in response to the Coronavirus situation and aims to support parents/carers of children and young people who have experienced loss and bereavement during the coronavirus situation.

Grief is a normal process and there is no one process for everyone who grieves. Children and young people may, however, need reassurance that whatever emotions they are feeling are normal.

With time, most children and adults will come to terms with what has happened and recover without the need for professional counselling. Research tells us that help and support is best given by trusted, familiar adults as and when it is needed.

Grief counselling is not routinely needed. It is only when feelings remain overwhelming, over a period of weeks, and interfere with the activities of daily living that counselling support may be appropriate. Some families with less community support may wish to seek professional support earlier, particularly during the phase of acute social distancing.

Experiencing the death of someone close is almost certain to give rise to powerful emotions, the intensity of which may be unfamiliar to children and young people. Recovery from loss is an active process and it will be unique to each individual. The uniqueness of every person's circumstances will create differences in the way that they respond. It is therefore important to be attentive to the individual needs, thoughts and preferences of the youngster.

It is helpful to think of the grieving process as a journey through an array of recurring feelings (e.g. shock, disbelief, denial, anger, guilt and fear) that become less intense over time and may be revisited several times. There may also be moments of happiness and laughter. Such a mixture of emotions can feel enormously confusing, which is why normalising a young person's experiences is so important.

Do not be surprised if...

- You are affected both emotionally and physically by the death of someone you love.
- You suddenly feel overwhelmed when you realise that you are alone with the sole responsibility for the wellbeing of your child.
- You do not get the expected tears of grief from your child. Grief shows itself in many other forms – often in angry or regressive behaviour or quirky questions which you may find difficult to answer.
- You find that relationships with in-laws change. For some families, in-laws are a huge source of support whilst others have found that grief can cause estrangement.

- You find positives in being in sole charge of your child and your life together.

What do children need?

- Honest information - Despite your instinct to protect your child from distressing information, children who are not given honest information about the death of someone they love tell us that they feel angry and excluded as well as sad that they were unable to mourn their loss alongside their parents. If children ask a question, they need an answer, even if it's an honest, 'I don't know.'
- Language they can understand - Explanations about the death should be given using language that your child can understand given their age and ability. Check back that they have understood your words and make time for the questions that they need to ask. Avoid statements like "Losing Grandma" or "Daddy is sleeping forever" as these will only confuse young children and perhaps build up anxiety about being lost themselves or fear of going to sleep. You can explain that death and sleep are different – when someone dies this means that they cannot do things as they once did like walking, talking, playing, shopping etc. and they cannot feel anything any longer either, so they are not sad, hurting, cold, hungry or ill.
- Choices - Children need your help to understand that grieving for the death of someone they love is normal, and to make choices about what would help them cope best at home and at school. Tell their teacher what has happened to ensure they get the support they need when they return to school.

How children might react?

- All children will react differently, but there are certain common factors which will tell you that your child is suffering maybe more than they are able to tell you.
- Sometimes children appear to cope surprisingly well at the time but then react later, when the initial attention has decreased and they face the reality of changed circumstances.
- Often young children do not have the language to express how they are feeling and so you must let their behaviour be your guide.
- You know your child and if you find they begin to behave out of character, it may be that they are struggling to understand and come to terms with the loss of someone that they love.

Common Reactions to Bereavement

Pre-school children:

- Do not understand permanency of death, so show little or no reaction to the news
- May react more to a sense of loss – of someone not being around any more
- May be affected more by changes resulting from how you manage your grief
- Will often search for the missing person and expect them to appear again
- May believe they did something wrong to cause the person to leave
- May ask the same questions repeatedly to try and make sense of what has happened
- May have difficulty settling to play, sleep or eat or show brief episodes of sadness
- May regress in behaviours for a while
- May find starting school difficult as they are likely to feel additionally anxious about leaving you now that someone they love has gone from their lives

Primary school children:

- Begin to understand more about death and its long term implications

- Can only sustain grief for short periods – need opportunities for play
- May feel guilty that something they said or did caused the death
- May show a fascination with the facts about the death
- May act out rituals associated with death (e.g. playing funerals)
- May be anxious about separating from you in case something happens to you
- May be more prone to minor infections or tummy aches or headaches
- May be restless, unable to concentrate at school
- May be prone to sudden tearful or angry outbursts
- May have difficulty settling at night

Secondary school children:

- Are more able to express their feelings verbally
- Are more likely to dwell on issues of life and death
- May behave in different ways in order to blot out the pain
- May feel the need to test their own mortality by taking risks in dangerous situations
- May show signs of depression
- May have difficulty eating or sleeping

Things that can help:

- Take time to talk together and remember the person who died. This will help your child to understand what has happened and keep memories alive.
- Seek support for yourself and your child if needed – there is nothing wrong in asking for help when your life has been turned upside down. The children and you may well find it helpful to have someone else to turn to when life gets especially hard.
- Tell teachers the whole story of what happened and keep in touch with them when your child returns to school. This ensures appropriate ongoing support is provided.
- Ask your child what would help them and, if they are old enough, involve them in decisions and plans for your lives together.
- Make an effort to regularly play and do enjoyable activities together. This helps to reduce feelings of isolation and provides opportunities for all of you to put your grief to one side for a while and have some fun.
- Establish ties with extended family to ensure your child knows who will care for them in the event of something happening to you. This helps to reduce their anxiety.
- Try not to get stressed about needing to succeed in all areas of life – take one area at a time and be pleased with what you do well and do not give yourself a hard time when things go wrong. This will relieve some of the pressure on you.
- Allow yourself ‘time out’ on your own to relax. This will enable you to recharge your batteries to cope with everyday life.
- Learn from other people, books and websites about grief and how children and adults react so that you can better understand what is happening to you and your child. This will give you greater confidence in supporting your child.

Useful Websites

The following websites offer specific content relating to Coronavirus:

Child Bereavement Network www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

- Short film about supporting bereaved children during the outbreak
- Helpline

Cruse Bereavement Care www.cruse.org.uk

- 'Grief and isolation' information
- Tips about talking to children
- Free helpline

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org.uk

- How to say goodbye when a funeral is not possible
- Free helpline or an online support/chat service.

Grief Encounter www.griefencounter.org.uk

- Activities for bereaved children and families on their Instagram page. With a series of online led therapeutic activities, the team of trauma, play and drama therapists will help parents to support their children.
- Advice on how to talk to children about the deaths of people they know in relation to Coronavirus.
- Advice on how to say goodbye when attending a funeral is not possible
- Free Helpline
- Online support/chat service

Quaker Social Action www.quakersocialaction.org.uk

- Organising a meaningful funeral during the Coronavirus pandemic

Other Websites:

Compassionate Friends www.tcf.org.uk

- Offers many different kinds of support for bereaved families

Gingerbread www.gingerbread.org.uk

- A UK charity providing and practical support for single parents

Samaritans [www.samaritans.org/emotional support](http://www.samaritans.org/emotional_support)

Barnardos <http://www.barnardos.org.uk>

Family Lives www.familylives.org.uk

- A national family support charity providing help and support in all aspects of family life.

Books for Younger Children:

- 'Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine' written by Diana Crossley (2009). Hawthorn Press
- 'The Invisible String' written by Patrice Karst (2018). Little, Brown Young Readers, US
- 'Waterbugs and Dragonflies' written by Doris Stickney (2009). Pilgrim Press
- 'When Dinosaurs Die' written by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (1998). Little Brown Books for Young People
- 'Always and Forever' written by Alan Durant and Debi Gliori (2013). Picture Corgi
- 'Badger's Parting Gifts' written by Susan Varley (1987). Andersen Press
- 'The Cat Mummy' written by Jacqueline Wilson (2009). Yearling

Books for Older Children:

- 'Ostrich Boys' written by Keith Gray (2008). Definitions (Young Adult)
- 'What On Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?' written by Trevor Romain (2003) Free Spirit Publishing
- 'Vicky Angel' written by Jacqueline Wilson (2007). Yearling
- 'Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How To Cope With Losing Someone You Love' written by Earl Grollman (1993). Beacon Press



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