

OWLS



# Supporting a child after the death of a loved one

## Telling a child that a loved one has died

If you have recently been bereaved by someone close to you, having to share that information with a child may seem like an impossible task. Keeping the reality from a child may seem like the kindest thing- as an adult's first instinct is to protect a child from anything which may harm them or cause them distress. Children are very perceptive and sensitive to changes in atmosphere around them.

The sooner a child has information and explanations for difficult or changing situations, the sooner they may be able to start to make sense of it. Below are some suggestions of how the news of a death may be delivered to a child;

- The news may be best delivered by a family member, but if this is too difficult an alternative would be someone familiar to the child.
- Try to have someone with you while you deliver this news, who can support you or take over if it becomes too difficult.
- Sit close to the child so they feel supported and you are there if they initiate physical contact.
- Begin by saying 'I have something sad to tell you...' this may prepare the child for a difficult conversation.
- Use clear, concise and honest language, for example; 'as you know Grandma has been very poorly and she died this morning.'
- Try to avoid using death euphemisms, for example; passed away/on, resting in peace, eternal rest, asleep, departed, gone, lost, slipped away or lost her battle; as these can cause further confusion for the child.
- Sharing your own emotions may help the child to share their own and feel secure and validated.
- Only give more information if the child requests it, by asking questions.
- Make sure the child understands that they can come back to you for further information or to ask more questions, if and when they are ready.
- Ensure that you discuss each stage with the child and not just make decisions for them; if this is at all possible.

## If the death is sudden or traumatic

The above suggestions are also relevant, with the below additions;

- Do not give too much detail about the death, only the necessary information as children may have very active imaginations which may transform such detail into something frightening i.e. nightmares.
- It may be helpful to have someone who is separate from the family to be present when you discuss the death with the child to be objective and to offer support.
- It may be useful to let the child know that although you have no further information at the moment, you will share more with them (if they would like you to), when you have it.



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## If a death is expected

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It may be that a loved one is poorly and a death is expected, in this case the hospital or hospice involved in the palliative care of the loved one may be best placed to offer support or guidance. Please see the below links, which may offer support or guidance;

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/talking-about-cancer/talking-to-children>

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/diagnosed/family-friends/children>

If you need further support we suggest that you contact your GP, or your child's school about relevant support that can be put into place.

## The funeral/memorial

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As previously mentioned the initial reaction of a parent/carer or guardian after a death is often to protect the child from anything which may cause distress, but attending a funeral or memorial service may offer some kind of closure, support and acceptance of the loss. The below suggestions may support an adult when thinking about whether a child should attend a funeral or memorial service;

- Ensure that you discuss each stage with the child and not just make decisions for them, this may offer them some form of control in what may feel like a chaotic situation.
- It may be helpful for the child to take some kind of role during the funeral/memorial service, or for them to make something to be used during the service.
- Ensure the child understands what will happen during the service i.e. cremation/burial (recommended reading - Someone Very Important Has Just Died: Immediate Help for People Caring for Children of All Ages at the Time of a Close Bereavement by Mary Turner).
- It may be helpful to have a general consensus about children attending, so there isn't a discrepancy which may lead to further confusion or distress.

## If it is not appropriate for the child to attend

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It may be felt that due to chronological or developmental age, or certain circumstances, it would not be appropriate for a child to attend a funeral or memorial service, in that case the following suggestions may be helpful;

- Explain to the child why they are not going to the service.
- Find an alternative; have a family member stay with the child and other children who are not attending and do a memorial activity (memory box/book/picture) or hold their own more appropriate service.



# Remembering their loved one

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There are a number of activities which can be done with a child, or group of children to encourage remembering a loved one;

- **Memory box** – decorated in the favourite colours of the loved one, things inside should remind the child of happy times. Items may include; photographs, music, favourite piece of clothing, a gift from the loved person to the child. The box can be opened and looked at whenever the child needs to feel connected to the loved one, or reminded of happy times.
- **Memorial service** – the child may wish to hold their own service, playing the loved ones favourite music, reading a loved poem and talking about happy memories. This may be a one off or something done on a special occasion; like a birthday.
- **Planting a tree or plant** – as it may be inappropriate or inconvenient (due to distance) for a child to visit where their loved one is buried, it may be helpful to have something in the garden or local park where a child can go and 'be with' or talk to their lost loved one. The planting could be part of a memorial service.
- **Making a donation to a hospice or charity** - the child may wish to make a donation in the name of their loved one to a charity that was important to them, for example an animal or local charity.
- **Make an object using a piece of clothing** – the child may wish to help in creating a cushion, blanket or teddy bear using one or a number of pieces of clothing or soft furnishings owned by the lost loved one. This could help the child to feel close to their lost loved one, or comforted at times of sadness or distress.
- **Family tree** – for older children creating a family tree may help them to see the bonds and connections between family despite the physical separation.

## Special occasions

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If a special occasion for example, Mother's day, Father's day, a birthday, religious holiday, wedding etc. is expected soon after the death of a loved one, the below suggestions may help to support you and the bereaved child;

- Do not ignore the occasion, but offer the child a way to mark it.
- If the child does not wish to mark the occasion, tell them that it is ok and they can also change their mind at a later date.
- On a birthday or Mother's/Father's day share the favourite meal of the lost loved one, using the shared meal as an opportunity to share memories.
- At a religious holiday such as Christmas; notice the empty space left by the loved one. A child may wish to set a place setting or write a card to acknowledge the space.
- Choose an activity to help remember the lost loved one to do together on the day of a special occasion.
- Be honest with the child about your own feelings about the loss, this openness may allow them to be more open about their own emotions.
- Ensure those around the child at the time of the special occasion i.e. School, Nursery etc. are aware of the potential for the child to be upset or unsettled.



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# Resources to support you and the child

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There are lots of resources available to offer help and support at which will probably be a very upsetting time. Below are some resources which may be useful;

There are a number of books including, story books, picture books, non-fiction books and factual information books to support a child who has experienced a bereavement. There are also many aimed at parents/carers/guardians/teachers or other adults working with children at the time of and shortly after a death to offer guidance and support.

## Books for an adult to share with a bereaved child

### ----- **Goodbye Mousie - Robie H. Harris, illustrated by Jan Ormerod**

One morning a boy finds that his pet, Mousie, won't wake up. The truth is Mousie has died. At first the boy doesn't believe it. He gets very mad at Mousie for dying, and then he feels very sad. But talking about Mousie, burying Mousie in a special box, and saying good-bye helps this boy begin to feel better about the loss of his beloved pet.

### **I Miss You (a First Look at Death) - Pat Thomas**

Written by a trained psychotherapist, journalist and parent, this reassuring picture book explores the difficult issue of death for young children. Children's feelings and questions about this sensitive subject are looked at in a simple but realistic way. This book helps them to understand their loss and come to terms with it.

### **Missing Mummy - Rebecca Cobb**

Written and illustrated by an award-winning author-illustrator, Missing Mummy deals with the loss of a parent from a child's point of view. The text and artwork explore the many emotions a bereaved child may experience, from anger to guilt and from sadness to bewilderment. Importantly, the book also focuses on the positive - the recognition that the child is still part of a family, and that his memories of his mother are to be treasured.

### **Always and Forever - Alan Durant, illustrated by Debi Gliori**

When Fox dies the rest of his family are absolutely distraught. How will Mole, Otter and Hare go on without their beloved friend? But, months later, Squirrel reminds them all of how funny Fox used to be, and they realise that Fox is still there in their hearts and memories.

### **Badger's Parting Gift - Susan Varley**

Badger knows he will die soon, so he does his best to prepare his friends. When he finally passes away, they are grief-stricken, but one by one they remember the special things he taught them during his life. By sharing their memories, his friends realise that although Badger is no longer with them physically, he lives on through their memories.

### **Granpa - John Burningham**

Granpa nurses his granddaughter's dolls, mistakes her strawberry-flavoured pretend ice-cream for chocolate, takes her tobogganing in the snow, and falls in with her imaginary plans to captain a ship to Africa, like all good Granpas should. It's a friendship that children who read this book will long remember.



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## **The Huge Bag of Worries - Virginia Ironside**

Wherever Jenny goes, her worries follow her - in a big blue bag. They are there when she goes swimming, when she is watching TV, and even when she is in the loo. Jenny decides they will have to go. But who can help her? Written by one of Britain's leading agony aunt's, The Huge Bag of Worries can be used as a conversation starter for whatever is making a child anxious.

## **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death - Laurie Krasny Brown**

No one can really understand death, but to children the death of a loved one can be especially perplexing and troublesome. Using very wise dinosaurs, this guide helps dispel negative connotations associated with death and provides answers to some of the most asked questions children may have.

## **All Kinds of Feelings - Emma Brownjohn**

How do you feel? Do you ever feel angry, or sad, or excited, or jealous? This lift-the-flap book prompts young children to learn about the different feelings everyone has, and open up about the emotions they are feeling. It includes a 'Feelings Game' with a spinner and wipe-clean board in the image of a blank face for exploring feelings

## **What Does Dead Mean? A Book for Young Children to help Explain Death and Dying - Caroline Jay and Jenny Thomas**

This beautifully illustrated book guides children gently through the 'big' questions they often ask about death and dying. Questions such as 'Is being dead like sleeping?' and 'Where do dead people go?' are answered simply and truthfully to help adults explain to children what happens when someone dies. Suitable for children aged 4+.

# **Books to support adults helping a bereaved child**

## **A Child's Grief: Supporting a Child When Someone in Their Family Has Died - Julie Stokes**

A very useful and informative introduction for any adult supporting a child through bereavement. It covers a variety of issues that may affect a child when a person close to them dies, both immediately and in the longer term. There are practical suggestions and ideas for activities to do together, as well as additional support suggestions.

## **Someone Very Important Has Just Died: Immediate Help for People Caring for Children of All Ages at the Time of a Close Bereavement - Mary Turner**

When a family member or close friend dies, it can be difficult to know how best to help the children and teenagers involved. Someone Very Important Has Just Died is a practical book written for those caring for children and teenagers suffering a close bereavement. Intended for use immediately or soon after the death has occurred, this book gives practical and detailed guidance on what adults might say and do to help children.

## **Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults - Atle Dyregov**

This book explains children's understanding of death at different ages and gives a detailed outline of exactly how the adults around them can best help them cope.

If you need any further advice or support, please get in touch.



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