

OWLS



Supporting a child after the death of someone special

What is grief?

Grief is the emotion which we feel when we are bereaved or have lost something. We may feel grief connected to a whole range of situations: moving house, leaving school or a job, the loss of a treasured item or even when bad weather spoils our best laid plans.

The loss of a significant person in our life takes grief to a whole other level. We may feel that we will never be happy again, or that we need to 'pretend' to be happy so those around us don't worry. We may have difficulty feeling motivated or become isolated from family and friends. This reaction is totally expected and not out of the ordinary. Children and adults both feel grief, but children's grief may present in a different way to an adult's. Because an adult is aware of the past, present and future, and because they are capable of logical thinking and problem solving, adult grief may be immediate, overwhelming and visible.

How might children grieve?

When a child is told that someone significant has died, they may not appear to understand the gravity of the news they have just received. Depending on their age, emotional and social development stage, personal experience and family circumstances a child may process news of a bereavement at a different pace. An adult may appear or feel like are wading through grief like a river, as children appear to exist more in the moment; the experience of grief for a child can be described as 'puddle jumping'. Two children from the same family of different ages may process and understand a bereavement very differently.

When using the term 'puddle jumping', the puddle is the child's grief: they may jump 'in and out' of that puddle of grief and the change when they are 'in or out' of it may be appear extreme. For example, a child may appear completely grief stricken and overwhelmed and then return to their 'normal self' within a couple of minutes; this behaviour, again, is completely expected and an unconscious mechanism used to stop the child becoming completely overwhelmed by the feeling of grief.

Acceptance of behaviour related to the bereavement is integral to the natural grieving process. The child may wish to talk about their loss, or not; neither is wrong but the responses of ignoring the child's grief, or forcing them to explore it when they do not want to can lead to further distress.

Managing the emotional welfare of someone else can be psychologically exhausting, especially in a time of high stress such as just after a bereavement. It is important that adults supporting a child also has their own support. If you need help to access adult bereavement support, contact the OWLS team.



**JANE TOMLINSON
APPEAL**

Contact the OWLS team on
owls@janetomlinsonappeal.com

Registered charity no: 1113894 (England and Wales)

Telling a child that somebody special has died

Having to share that information with a child that someone special has died may seem like an impossible task. Your instinct may be to protect the child from the news, fearing that the reality will cause them harm or distress; however, children are very perceptive and sensitive to changes in the atmosphere around them and may notice that something is different.

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. The following suggestions may help you to tell a child that someone special has died:

- Have a family member or somebody the child is familiar with deliver the news of the death
- If possible, have someone with you while you deliver this news who can support you or take over if it becomes too difficult
- Get down to their level or sit close to the child. This will help them feel supported, and it also means you are available if they initiate physical contact like a hug or hand holding
- Prepare the child for a difficult conversation: "I have something sad to tell you..."
- Use clear, honest and age-appropriate language, for example: "As you know Grandma has been very poorly. Sadly, she died this morning."
- Check the child understands what "died" means. You could explain that when someone is dead their heart stops beating, their lungs stop breathing and they don't feel pain anymore. Explain that when someone dies they never stop being dead, although people have different ideas about what happens after someone has died.
- Although we often use them without thinking, try to avoid using death euphemisms when you explain to a child that someone has died: "passed away/on," "gone to sleep," "gone," "lost," "slipped away" or "lost their battle" can cause further confusion for the child.
- Sharing your feelings and showing emotion is absolutely fine - this may help the child to express how they feel, too, and help them feel secure and validated.
- Only give more information if the child asks questions or requests it.
- Make sure the child understands that they can always come back to you for further information or to ask more questions at a later time if they need to.
- Ensure that you discuss the subsequent arrangements with the child and not just make decisions for them, if this is at all possible.
- Remember that children experience grief like jumping in and out of a puddle: their emotional state may change quickly and dramatically as they come to understand the situation.



If a death is sudden, unexpected or traumatic

- Avoid giving too much detail about the nature of death - try to limit your explanation to include only the necessary information. Children can have very active imaginations that can transform too much detail into nightmares or upsetting thoughts. You know your child best to be able to judge what they need to know; the most important thing is that they understand the person has died.
- It may be helpful to have someone who is separate from the family present when you discuss the death with the child - this may help you to be objective and to offer support.
- If the situation is under review or more developments are yet to be known, you may want 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.

If a death is expected

It may be that a death is expected due to a long-term injury or illness. In most cases, the hospital or hospice involved in the palliative care of the child's special person may be best placed to offer support or guidance. 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 following links also offer support and guidance when someone special has died:

- www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/talking-about-cancer/talking-to-children
- www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/diagnosed/family-friends/children

The funeral or memorial service

The following suggestions may support an adult when thinking about whether a child should attend the funeral or memorial service of someone special who has died:

- To offer the child some form of control in what may feel like a chaotic situation, as far as possible, ensure that you discuss each stage and not just make decisions for them,
- It may be helpful for the child to take some kind of role during the funeral or memorial service, or for them to make something to be used during the service.
- Ensure the child understands what will happen during the service, for example whether there will be a cremation or burial, and this means (recommended reading: 'Someone Very Important Has Just Died' 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 the service

Attending a funeral or memorial service can offer a form of closure, support and acceptance of the death of someone special; however, it may be felt that due to the child's chronological or developmental age, or certain circumstances, it would not be appropriate for a child to attend. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- Explain to the child why they are not going to the service. As ever, be clear, honest and use language the child will understand.
- Find an alternative to mark the occasion. Try not to pretend that it is a normal day like any other: talk to the child in advance about what they would like to do to remember their special person while the funeral is taking place. Have a family member stay with the child and other children who are not attending and do a memorial activity or hold their own more appropriate service - perhaps sharing happy memories or telling stories about the person who has died.

Remembering the person who has died

There are a number of activities which can be done with a child, or group of children to encourage remembering their special person. The key is to make it personal and allow the child take the lead.

Memory box – Decorated in the favourite colours of the person who has died, things inside the memory box should remind the child of happy times. Items may include photographs, drawings, music, favourite piece of clothing, personal effects, or a gift from the loved person to the child. The box can be opened and the contents looked at whenever the child needs to feel connected to their special person, or be reminded of happy times.

Memorial service – The child may wish to hold their own service, where they play the favourite music of their special person who has died, reading a loved poem and talking about happy memories. This may be a one-off event or an activity that reoccurs on special occasions.

Planting a tree or plant – As it may be inappropriate or impractical for a child to visit where the burial place, 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 special person. 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 special person 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 person who has died. This could help the child to feel close to their special person, 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.



Further reading to support a bereaved child



Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults by Atle Dyregrov

Whether a child experiences the death of a parent, sibling, other relation or friend, or of a classmate or teacher, it is important for those caring for bereaved children to know how to respond appropriately to the child's needs. This book deals with a range of common physical and psychological responses and describes the methods of approaching grief in children that have been shown to work best.

A Child's Grief: Supporting a Child When Someone in Their Family Has Died by 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.

The Simple Guide to Child Trauma: What It Is and How to Help by Betsy de Thierry

The perfect starting point for any adult caring for or working with a child who has experienced trauma. It will help them to understand more about a child's emotional and behavioural responses following trauma and provides welcome strategies to aid recovery. Reassuring advice will also rejuvenate adults' abilities to face the challenges of supporting children.

The Whole-Brain Child by Dr Tina Payne Bryson and Dr. Daniel Siegel

Neuroscientist Daniel J. Siegel and parenting expert Tina Payne Bryson explain the new science of how a child's brain is wired and how it matures. Different parts of a child's brain develop at different speeds and understanding these differences can help you turn any outburst, argument, or fear into a chance to integrate your child's brain and raise calmer, happier children.

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

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.



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Books for an adult to share with a bereaved child



I Have a Question about Death: A Book for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Other Special Needs by Arlen Grad Gaines and Meredith Englander Polsky

Death is a difficult topic for any parent or educator to explain to a child, perhaps even more so when the child has Autism Spectrum Disorder or other Special Needs. This book is designed specifically to help children with these additional needs to understand what happens when someone dies.

When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness by Marge Eaton Heegaard

This book will help families communicate and evaluate a child's understanding and feelings about family change while teaching basic concepts of illness and healthy coping skills.

I Miss You (a First Look at Death) by 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 by 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.

Invisible String by Patrice Karst

'That's impossible!' said twins Jeremy & Liza after their Mum told them they're all connected by this thing called an Invisible String. 'What kind of string?' they asked with a puzzled look, to which Mum replied, 'An Invisible String made of love.' That's where the story begins. A story that teaches of the tie that really binds.

The Huge Bag of Worries by 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.

All Kinds of Feelings by 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.

Always and Forever by Alan Durant, illustrated by Debi Giori

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.



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