Grief and coronavirus (COVID-19)

Children and Bereavement - Support for households, parents and children

Responses to grief at different ages

People talk of a grief process, but it is much less tidy than that. How we think and feel will change not just day to day but moment by moment and will also depend on personality and previous life experiences. Understanding a little bit about how children experience and express grief can be helpful.

When bereavement happens, in a family, adults, need to care for themselves too and respect their feelings which will be many and varied. Grief often has a physical response too causing symptoms like shivering and diarrhoea which might be confusing in the current circumstances.

If there are children of different ages, needing different support, this can make the task of supporting them more complex, but shared activities, play and stories can help across ages. It may be possible within the social distancing guidelines to access help with very practical things, most communities have a volunteer group to help with shopping for example. Use whatever helpful contact is available to you for emotional support too.

Across the spectrum of ages there are no hard boundaries. Teenagers will need some of the same basic help as infants, but each age group has some distinct needs related to their developmental stages.

Infants

Infants know when something is unsettled in their life and are affected by it. They can't verbalise their feelings, but they will be expressed by behaviours. Sleep and eating patterns may change, they may cry more frequently and need more physical comforting, separation anxiety may increase.

What can help?

Try and keep to their usual routine, and ideally, keep up the contact you have established with people they know well and can respond to. Aim to keep meal times and bed times free from too many distractions and offer lots of physical affection.

The world of 2-4 year olds

2-4 year olds focus on themselves. They are not able to understand the permanence of death and think it is reversible, "I know Grandma died. Can she come for tea tomorrow?" They may repeat the same questions and will 'puddle jump': being deeply upset and questioning, then bouncing off to play or asking if there is still pizza for tea. There may be some regressive behaviour in their eating, sleeping or toileting patterns. They might be irritable and confused.
What can help?
Patiently providing simple, factual information, that does not change. Sensory play like sand and playdough will help them explore their feelings and help them to tell their story, for further ideas please see below.

Children aged 4-7
Children at this age have vivid imaginations which do not always separate fantasy and reality. This is accompanied by rapidly developing language. Many in this group will also think death is reversible. They may feel responsible because of their thoughts or behaviour, "It's my fault he died. I was cross with him and wished he would go away". There will be questions: What? Who? How? Why? They may sometimes act as if nothing has happened and there may be general distress and confusion.

What can help?
Provide words to describe some of their feelings such as numb, grief, sad, angry, heartache, sorrow, cross, lost. Children understand things very literally so terms like stroke or heart-attack can be confusing and more explanatory explanations like, their heart stopped working may be easier for children to process. Keep explanations simple, but descriptive. If someone dies with Covid 19 it may help to explain that they weren’t able to breathe properly anymore or that all the important parts of their body were worn out. Many children will express their feelings through play.

Children aged 7-11
By age 7-11 children are beginning to recognise death as final. They want details, sometimes more than seems comfortable to share, but this will stop them imagining worse scenarios. They want to know the "right" way to respond and are starting to have the ability to mourn and understand mourning. They will express grief through their play. They feel different to their peers and may "hang back" socially and educationally.

What can help?
Be willing to talk; encourage the expressing and identifying of feelings, answer questions, explain options and allow for choices. Be available but also allow alone time. Provide physical outlets and affection as appropriate. Support groups can be helpful and so will understanding friends.

Links to helpful organisations

Winstons Wish

Child bereavement UK
0800 02 888 40 support@childbereavementuk.org

Childhood bereavement network

Cruse
Prayer Spaces in Schools
www.prayerspacesinschools.com lots of ideas for creative ways children can connect with their feelings and thoughts and offer them as prayer.

Light a virtual candle here.
www.churchofengland.org/life-events(funerals/light-candle

Books to use with children

Wonderfully written and illustrated book which deals profoundly with bereavement and prayer.

**Badger’s Parting Gift**, Susan Varley. Harper Collins
A classic! The gifts that Badger has given his friends live on and help them to remember him.

**Water bugs and Dragonflies**, Doris Stickney. Bloomsbury
Conveys profoundly the idea of a place beyond our experience and understanding. Not all children can grasp the insect metaphor. Available in a full-colour, illustrated version.

**Michael Rosen’s Sad Book**, Michael Rosen. Walker
Rosen’s personal and honest description of grief with superb Quentin Blake illustrations.

**Big Bag of Worries**, Virginia Ironside. Hodder
Allows children to face their worries and know that they are a normal aspect of life and that they are not responsible for all the things which concern them.

**Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine**, Diana Crossley. Winstons Wish
An activity book to help children when someone has died.


Explores loss and rediscovery.

**Cry, Heart, But Never Break**, Glenn Ringtved. Enchanted lion Books
Meets death face on as the grim reaper. A good book to open up all kinds of questions, not a starting place for the inexperienced.

**The Heart and the Bottle**, Oliver Jeffries. Harper Collins
Explores cleverly how we ‘bottle up’ our feelings
Activities that can support bereaved children and families

Activities can help us to express feelings at any age, often it maybe the conversation that is most helpful as we are creating something or it might be the space for silent thought.

**Play** is normal and helps children integrate the reality of the death into their lives. You can create possibilities and invitations to play, observe quietly and offer guidance if you feel it is required.

**Worry monster / worry people** can help with worries or fears. They are not a substitute for a human being but a potential starting place for children to express their worries.

**A cuddly toy**, hot water bottle or microwavable ‘hottie’ all can bring a feeling of comfort.

Create a **life story photo book or memory box** about the child’s life with the person who has died. Alternatively write, draw or paint a story about the deceased person.

**Sand** - the movement and shaping of sand is therapeutic. Provide all kinds of objects; people, emergency vehicles, skeletons, trees, buildings... anything which might speak to the circumstances around a death and enable children to express their feelings and ask questions.

**What did they like to do?** Thinking about /drawing an activity which the deceased person really enjoyed is a good opportunity to speak about them. Remembering a place which was special to them can help in the same way.

**Family and friendship tree** drawing a tree and adding leaves with the names of family and friends can remind children of all the people who love and care for them.

Friendship bracelets also remind children of all the family friends they still have. You can use bead sand thread but simple strips of decorated paper work just as well.