

## Helping your child at home – 4

### *Child Bereavement*



Bereavement is something that we all encounter at some point in life and it is helpful to understand something of how children respond to the death of someone in their lives and some guidance as to how adults can help children manage their loss.

#### *How the grief of children may differ from adults*

Children have limited ability to put their feelings into words. Children depend on adults to teach them the language of feelings. "I'm feeling sad". "Sometimes I feel angry", "Grandma is feeling lonely". "Are you feeling sad?"

It is helpful to understand that children have a limited tolerance for emotional pain. They often grieve in brief but intense spurts. They may distract themselves by pretending or playing happily. This is normal and does not indicate that they are not grieving.

Children may not understand that a loss is final, irreversible or certain. Their grief may even be postponed until a later developmental stage.

#### *Look after yourself*

Loosing someone important in your life can leave *you* feeling isolated and confused. You may feel you have been forced into a journey for which you have no knowledge or guide. Information can provide you with something like a guide, helping you to avoid pitfalls and unexpected difficulties. Help can be found from a range of sources:

- Books and videos
- Support groups, where you can talk with others who have had similar experiences can help you feel less isolated and alone
- Professional help from a counsellor or psychotherapist can give you more specific individual support. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy is the umbrella organisation for many counsellors and psychotherapists. (0870 443 5252 [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk))

Different types of support work for different people. For example, some may find support groups comforting; others may find them depressing.

#### *When a child grieves*

A child may experience the pain of bereavement as much as an adult, but may not express it in the same way. We need to ensure that we do not ignore their grief but find loving ways to support them. It is important that adults understand that they cannot protect children from their own feelings when someone close to them dies - we cannot stop them feeling sad – but we do need to support them *in their* sadness.

Children need to have the opportunity to express their loss. They learn to grieve from the adults around them, so if parents and close family members express their grief and acknowledge it with their child, their children are likely to know how to express their grief too. Equally they can learn to bottle up emotions if that is what they see around them.

Children cannot sustain sad emotions and will suddenly revert to appearing happy and content. Their behaviour has been likened to jumping in & out of puddles. It is important to realise that this does not mean that children are unaffected by their loss.

#### *Children at different ages will respond differently*

Infants under two are likely to respond to the absence of a significant person who responded to their needs. They will also be affected by the 'upset' and emotional environment about them. Toddlers might show a basic understanding of death, but will not realise the implications (e.g. a dead bird will not get up again).

Children between two and five tend to be very literal and it is important to be truthful and avoid false explanations, such as 'gone to sleep' or 'flown away'. The child may want to go and wake them up or fly off to find them. (This is not the same as a religious conviction, which can be comforting). It is also useful to know that children of this age do not have an adult concept of time, so "forever" is difficult for them to grasp. Consequently, they may not apparently react when told about a death.

Children who are older behave in different ways reflecting their stage of development. The Child Bereavement Charity has useful information about this.

Losing a parent, brother or sister will have a much bigger impact on children than losing a more distant relative, although it does depend on the depth of relationship and the role played by that more distant relation. When a sibling dies, they may wonder why they are alive and their sibling is dead. They may fear it will be their turn to die next. They may feel guilty – however irrational. Children may feel insecure following a close death of a parent. They need emotional security and care from those around them. They still need to be parented and it is important not to place expectations on them – "Be brave for Mummy" - it may be a heavy burden too great to bear.

#### *The kind of death*

If the death is sudden, reactions are very different from an anticipated death. The immediate reaction to it is shock and numbness, with the potential for persistent grief. It allows no opportunity to prepare, say goodbye and people are left with a sense of 'unfinished business'.

When the death is anticipated, every opportunity should be made to prepare children. However hard you try, children pick up the emotional environment around them and it is important to share the truth (no matter how hard) rather than for them to live with uncertainty. When there are no secrets, families can draw closer together, talk about fears and feelings and in turn receive comfort and reassurance. Workbooks are available from the Child Bereavement Charity to help address difficulties around an expected death:

'My Book about Me' & 'This is about Me'

#### *The Reaction of Family Members*

Children learn how to grieve by observing others. If parents are pre-occupied by keeping their feelings under control, children may feel they should not show their feelings either. Equally if a parent is overwhelmed with their own grief or depression, a child may try to suppress their own feelings. If this is the case, it can be helpful to get support from another member of the family, who may be able to share the emotional burden of managing their child's grief whilst managing their own intense feelings. Children also need to take a break from grief stricken relatives and their own sadness. It is therefore important to keep their usual

routines, such as attending nursery. Their key person and other members of staff will be sensitive and alert to their situation. Often the child may need their play setting to be a safe 'oasis' where they can escape from the emotional environment at home. Others may want to talk about it with their key carer or even enact their emotions in role play.

### *What helps?*

The broad framework that allows children to grieve and grow through their grief has to be provided by the adults who have responsibility for their care. Sometimes children don't get to say goodbye, so it is good to give them the opportunity to say what they want to say to the one who has died (a picture to say, "I miss you. I love you..."). Children need:

- Adults around them who they can turn to and trust
- Their feelings to be received without judgement
- To be allowed to cry (it is not helpful for them to be told that they must 'be brave')
- Acceptance if tears do not flow and if they don't show their grief.
- A secure place in which anger and other feelings can be expressed

Practical ideas include:

- Physical exercise, shouting and noisy play (to release a variety of emotions)
- Allowing aggressive behaviour to be expressed (e.g. a messy painting session)
- Take time before changing familiar patterns or activities. Children and adults need time with things that belonged to the one who has died.
- It is helpful for children to choose belongings that they can treasure. These memories are what help us to get in touch with our feelings.
- Pets can be helpful for a child who is grieving – an animal to love, cuddle or take on walks. Equally a favourite soft toy can be very comforting.
- Some children like to be cuddles or stroked. Some may like to listen to soft music or a calm story tape.
- If you think your child would benefit from meeting other children who have been bereaved. CRUSE is an organisation supporting the bereaved (0870 167 1677) and may have someone trained to support children. A children's hospice may also be able to advise on someone who offers additional support.
- Consider having a small ritual so that the child can say what they want – tying a picture to a balloon, lighting a candle, planting a tree...
- Other ways of remembering are creating scrapbooks of times spent together, filling a 'memory box'. Special workbooks are available in the Child Bereavement Charity shop and in the suggested reading area of their website.
- Make time for special days anniversaries, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Grandparent Day etc.
- Children may need to look again at the details surrounding the death of the important person as they grow older. This is not unresolved grief, but the experience of different feelings at a later stage in life and their progressive maturity and understanding.

Information accessed from Child bereavement Charity

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

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