

### Introduction

Bereavement is a distressing but common experience – one which we will all have during our lifetimes. However, in our everyday life we think and talk about personal loss and death very little. Death and dying are played out through stories in the media – newspapers, television, documentaries and even in the “soaps”. It is reported in the local and national news (wars, famines, shootings etc). But these tend to be “*death at a distance*”, and involving national figures (e.g. Princess Diana). Children have a daily exposure to death as presented on television and in newspapers. However, in our everyday life many of us think and talk little about how it applies to ourselves and ordinary people. So is it a taboo or an obsession?

Early death in the community is much reduced, thanks to better sanitation, diet and health care and people are living longer and healthier lives. Deaths today in Western society tend to be of the old and the very young, and most take place in hospitals and other formal settings, away from home. First hand experience is less common than previously so dying is to a large extent unfamiliar, hidden from view. Most of us do not have much of a chance to either learn about grieving, how it feels, what are the right things to do, what is “*normal*” or to come to terms with it until quite late on in our lives. This is more so for children who we tend to shield from such painful experiences.

If you are a parent or carer who is grieving the death of someone close to you and your children, you may feel a whole range of emotions in a very short period of time. You may feel shocked, sad, angry, guilty, anxious, lonely and sometimes relieved. Coping with all these emotions all jumbled up together can be exhausting. On top of this you know that how you are affects your children and you want to do your best for them at a time when you are finding it a great strain to look after yourself. Balancing the needs of others with our own can be tricky at these times.

It's important to make time for yourself away from your children occasionally and appropriately to be able to work through some of your feelings for yourself. This will help re-charge your energies and give you the strength to support your children.

### Grieving

Children's grieving is different to that of adults in that they lack the life experiences to set it in context. They may have little appropriate language for asking the things they want to know, although their curiosity around death is no different from their inquisitiveness about many new experiences. It takes time to understand that death is universal, irreversible and ultimately inevitable. What is also different is the way children can cut off when they have had enough – they grieve through a waxing and waning style – going in and out of it. For adults it's like wading through a huge river but for children it's like puddle jumping. They can be in floods of tears and then just switch off. But we need to remember that when they are in their puddles it is no different from us wading through our river of grief. By the age of about 10 years, they understand the finality of death in much the same way as adults do.

How your child copes will depend on how the adults around them are coping or behaving and on their age. It's perfectly fine to cry in front of your children and with them, explaining why you feel angry or sad. Saying for example “*I'm very sad because your daddy died and I miss him*” lets

your child understand why you're sad and that it's alright to show that you're upset.

The death of someone close in a child's life shatters their sense that the world is safe. They suddenly have evidence that not everything is secure and certain. Things they have previously taken for granted are no longer there.

Young children are more likely to act out their distress than to speak about it because they do not have the vocabulary to explain how they feel or to ask challenging or enquiring questions. So your child may be irritable or aggressive. You can help by encouraging them to talk about how they feel and by giving them some of the words they might need to express that. Drawing and painting are therapeutic in themselves but they can also help children describe how they are feeling.

Although it may be hard, try to use real words like "died" or "death" rather than "lost" or "passed away" as a child may not understand that they mean the same thing.

## **Under 5s**

Children at this age usually make strong connections and it is likely that they will become very connected to the person caring for them during the grieving process.

Share your thoughts and observations with friends and families or nursery staff to take some of the pressure off you. They may also revert back to much younger behaviour and become more clingy and fretful.

Children at this age do not really understand that death is permanent – for instance *"I know Mummy's dead and gone to heaven but she will come back for my birthday won't she?"* Dead may just mean not alive without any real understanding of what that actually means.

As the adults left behind, it is up to us to provide the memory prompts children at this age need to remember things, such as photos, telling stories about the person who has died, etc – without them they will have virtually forgotten the person who has died by the time they are six.

## **From 5 years to pre-teens**

School age children usually understand about death and will know the person who has died is not coming back. However, this is an age group who will find it particularly hard to deal with the change – so it's very important to maintain home and school routines as much as possible. Routine, structure and predictability increase their sense of being safe and the world continuing.

For the younger ones they may see death as the end result of some violence or aggression.

## **Teenagers**

Teenagers experience grief in a similar way to adults. They will be more aware of how others feel and may bottle up their own emotions to support others.

It's important not to let them take on the adult role, caring for you – allow them still to be teenagers – and make sure they have the time and space to express their feelings with you or with their close friends, people of their own age that they feel they can confide in. Loss of an

important relationship can be very painful and destabilising, especially at a time when teenagers are seeking to escape their dependency and take control of their independency.

Alternatively their grief reactions may lead to violence or aggression, mood swings will be common and tension and “fighting” within the family may become more frequent and it is not uncommon for teenagers to exhibit more risk taking behaviour.

## **Helping bereaved children**

### Breaking the news

It's never going to be easy breaking the news of a death to a child. If the child isn't told, they may be left confused. It's important that:

- You, as the parent, or someone else who is very close to the child, tells them about the death soon after it has occurred
- You use simple, factual words matched to the language and understanding of the child
- You answer the child's questions truthfully and as often as they are asked. Admit to not knowing if that is the case
- You show your emotions in front of the children and explain why you feel like you do
- You accept the child as a bereaved person and don't push them aside

### Viewing the body

For children as for adults, it can be important for us to see the dead body. It reinforces the fact that the person is dead. It gives us an opportunity to say goodbye.

Like adults, children, even young ones, need to make the choice. We can prepare them by explaining where the body will be, how it might look, that they can talk to the person but the person won't be able to answer them etc.

### Children and funerals

Funerals are an important occasion and for some the final practical event which marks someone's death. Whatever your funeral rituals may be it will be important to involve the children in them.

Again it is important to prepare them in advance so they will know what to expect and to let them choose whether or not to go.

There is no evidence to show that children attending funerals are harmed by the experience; in fact, the opposite is sometimes true.

## **Grief and everyday life**

Be ready for emotions to swing backwards and forwards. Everyone will be different – there is no right way and no one can tell a person how to grieve. Grieving takes time, everyone will go on their own journey through their grief. It is a natural process and it can't be “fixed” but there are lots of ways that you can help and support yourself and your children.

Children who have suffered bereavement may be particularly vulnerable to a subsequent loss – one which on the surface is less distressing. So a child who seemed to cope well with Mum dying

may be completely distraught when a pet dies at a later date. Successive losses over a short time frame may be another “red flag” indicator for seeking specialist advice.

There are people who hardly seem to grieve at all. They do not cry at funerals, avoid any mention of their loss and return to normal life remarkably quickly. If this is their normal way of dealing with loss then this will do them no harm, but others may suffer from strange physical symptoms or repeated spells of depression over the following years. Every loss is a unique experience and we deal with these in different ways.

Some people may start to grieve and then get stuck behind the early sense of disbelief and shock. Even after years pass by they may still find it hard to believe that the person they loved is dead. Learning how to hold onto what we have had and lost, as well as getting on with our life in very changed circumstances can be very challenging.

## School

It can be very tough for children to settle back into school life and difficult for them to concentrate. Whilst it is helpful to maintain their normal routines, it is important that the school is informed and that they put in place support for your child.

Your child does not need to be made to feel “different” but does need an adult they can go to at school when they are not coping.

They may be susceptible to being teased in the playground so make sure the school and your child’s teacher know and, if appropriate, ask the teacher to inform the class before the child’s return to school. The teacher could also enlist the support of the child’s friends to watch out for them and be supportive.

## **Help from your doctor**

Talk to your doctor if your grieving or that of a family member becomes a problem. If the sleepless nights go on for too long or you start to feel depressed and are unable to cope with day to day activities, they will be able to offer help in a number of ways. Grief can affect your appetite, energy levels and normal sleep patterns.

For some it will be enough to be able to talk to other people who have gone through the same thing but for others they may need medication for a short period of time or counselling. Your GP will discuss this with you.

Bereavement turns our world upside down and is one of the most painful experiences we will ever have to deal with. There’s nothing wrong with asking for help for yourself or a child,

See next page for useful contacts.

## Support and advice

[www.asksid.net](http://www.asksid.net) (put bereavement in the keyword box)

### Bereavement Advice Centre

<http://www.bereavementadvice.org/>

Helpline: 0800 634 9494 (Mon-Fri, 9am – 5pm)

Email: [info@bereavementadvice.org](mailto:info@bereavementadvice.org)

Supports bereaved people on a range of practical issues via a single freephone number. It offers advice on all aspects of bereavement from registering the death and finding a funeral director through to probate, tax and benefit queries.

### Compassionate Friends

<http://www.tcf.org.uk/>

Helpline: 0845 123 2304

Email: [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk)

An organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering understanding, support and encouragement to others after the death of a child or children. The helpline is always answered by a bereaved parent who is there to listen when you need someone to talk to.

### Cruse Bereavement Care

<http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk/>

Helpline: 0844 477 9400; Sheffield branch 0114 249 3328. Email: [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk) or [info@cruse.org.uk](mailto:info@cruse.org.uk) or try the Sheffield branch on [sheffield@cruse.org.uk](mailto:sheffield@cruse.org.uk)

Sheffield branch address: Alpha House, 10 Carver Street, Sheffield, S1 4FS

Cruse exists to promote the well-being of bereaved people and to enable anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss. Provides counselling and support and offers information, advice, education and training services.

**RD4U** – (Cruse Bereavement Care's young person's services)

<http://www.rd4u.org.uk/>

Helpline: 0808 808 1677 (Mon-Fri, 9:30am – 5pm)

Email: [info@rd4u.org.uk](mailto:info@rd4u.org.uk)

### Samaritans

<http://www.samaritans.org/>

Helpline: 08457 90 90 90

Sheffield Branch: 272 Queens Road, Sheffield, S2 4DL.

Tel: 0114 276 7277

Email: [queensroad@sheffieldsamaritans.org.uk](mailto:queensroad@sheffieldsamaritans.org.uk) or [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

National organisation offering support to those in distress who feel suicidal or despairing and need someone to talk to. Samaritans also provides a widely used e-mail service (not a chatroom but they endeavour to answer within 24 hours).

## The Way Foundation

<http://www.wayfoundation.org.uk/>

Tel: 0870 011 3450; email: [info@wayfoundation.org.uk](mailto:info@wayfoundation.org.uk)

WAY (Widowed and Young) is an organisation for people who have become widows or widowers at age 50 or younger, and also for their children. The Foundation has local support groups across the UK, holidays and a message board. Their site also has links to other relevant sites.

## Winston's Wish

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

Helpline: 0845 030405

Email: [info@winstonswish.org.uk](mailto:info@winstonswish.org.uk)

Helpful leaflets are available on Winston's Wish website "Seeing the body", "Attending the funeral", "Alternative goodbyes" etc.

Also try:

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

## Child Death Helpline

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

The Child Death Helpline is a helpline for anyone affected by the death of a child of any age, from pre-birth to adult, under any circumstances, however recently or long ago.

Tel: FREEPHONE 0800 282 986

The helpline is open every day throughout the year.

- Every evening 19.00 – 22.00
- Monday to Friday 10.00 – 13.00
- Tuesday and Wednesday 13.00 – 16.00

Your call will be answered by a bereaved parent.  
An interpreting service is available.

## ANTS (A Nice Time On Saturdays)

A student-led volunteer group that organises activity days for children aged 8-11 years from Sheffield who have recently experienced a close family bereavement. Provides fun days, which include craft activities in the morning and more outgoing, adventurous pursuits in the afternoon. There are currently no vacancies (as at February 09), but the group does operate a waiting list. Term-time only. Usually once a month. Please contact for joining information.

**Address:** University of Sheffield Union of Students, Western Bank, S10 2TG

**Tel: 0114 222 8547**

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### **Crystal Peaks Bereavement Drop – In Centre**

Provides an opportunity to talk to people who have been trained in bereavement listening and to meet with other people who have experienced such loss either recently or in the past.

**Address:** Conference Room 3, Council and Library Building, Sheffield, S20

**Tel: 0114 293 0612**

Fri 10am-12noon (new members meet inside main doors of library 10-10.30am).  
Bimonthly carers meeting.

### **Gone Forever Project**

Dedicated to helping children and young people cope with loss through bereavement and separation. Gives advice and training to adults who have a responsibility for helping children and young people.

**Tel: 0114 243 8773 or 01433 630 351**

**Website:** [www.goneforever.org.uk](http://www.goneforever.org.uk)

### **Rainbow Counselling**

Confidential one-to-one and couple counselling service, dealing with bereavement. Can offer specifically Christian counselling and long term psychotherapy.

**Locations:** Broomhill Methodist Church, Fulwood Road, S10 3BD

- Walkley Ebenezer Methodist Church, Greenhow Street, S6 3TP

- 484 Manchester Road, S10 5PN

- 99 Murray Road, S11 7GH

**Tel: 0114 230 5271**

**Website:** [www.rainbowcounselling.org.uk](http://www.rainbowcounselling.org.uk)

**PLEASE NOTE:** This service charges for sessions, depending on household income. Please contact for more details.

*Please note that SIGN has several children's books on Bereavement that explain death to children and help children who are suffering from loss.*