



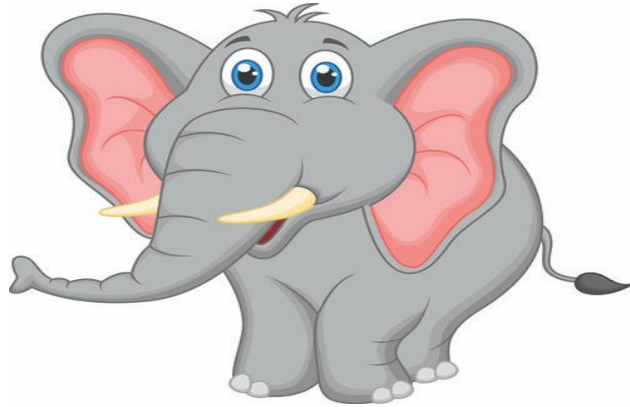
Havens
Hospices

Child Grief and Bereavement Support Pack

Every one of us
Making every day count.

Registered Charity Number 1022119

The Elephant In The Room



There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting,
so it is hard to get around it.
Yet, we squeeze by with,
"How are you?" and "I'm fine..."
and a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.
We talk about everything else
except the elephant in the room.
We all know it's there.
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk.
It is constantly on our minds.
For you see, it is a very big elephant.
But we do not talk about
the elephant in the room.
Oh, please, somebody say his/her name
Oh, please, say it again
Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room.
For if we talk about their death,
perhaps we can talk about their life.
Can I say their name...
and not have you look away?
For if I cannot,
you are leaving me alone...
In a room...
with an elephant.
~Author Unknown

Grief and Children

The Elephant in the Room.....

Some children will be exposed to sickness and death at some point in their young lives because death is a part of the natural cycle of life and, contrary to popular belief, children do grieve. However, they grieve differently to us adults. It might seem like one minute they will be feeling sad, upset, inquisitive and asking questions about what is happening and the very next second they may run off and resume playing or talk about something completely different – maybe ask for a drink.

That is OK. It does not mean that they do not care, or they are not sad – children are just developmentally wired this way. They do not have the ability to forward think like us adults do.

Adults know all too well what will happen next when somebody dies, they know what the death means for them and their future and they will already be starting the grieving process. It does not happen like this for children - children live in the moment and often express their feelings differently. Even young children, who may not fully understand death, will react to those adults grieving around them. Young babies can experience loss as a separation from someone they are attached to. They will react to it by crying or being withdrawn or maybe searching for the person.

Children’s understanding of death develops in parallel with the child’s cognitive maturing through childhood, so this means their understanding of death depends on age and cognitive (thinking) development:

AGE	CONCEPT OF DEATH	POSSIBLE REACTIONS
Children are most dependant on adults to regain their balance at this age.		
0-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not understand death is final. Cannot comprehend nor emotionally accept the permanence of the death. May be reversible – seen as living somewhere else. Do not grasp that all the functions of life have ceased. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May search repeatedly for the deceased. Become clingy and afraid of strangers. Feeding and sleeping difficulties The death undermines their security and their world becomes unreliable and unsafe. Feeling insecure

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their questions reflect their concern about physical wellbeing of the dead person. • Experience of death undermines their confidence and their world becomes unreliable and insecure. • No concept of death, or the separation and despair • More exposure to death and understanding of death as permanent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fears abandonment and separation, anxious reactions. • Loud protest, despair. • Annoyed at changes in patterns or routines. • Sleep problems. • May revert to 'baby' behaviours, withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression • Anger, guilt, temper tantrums, nightmares • Behaviour, learning or school problems. • Perfect child, brave and in control. • Maybe use the word 'death' without understanding its full meaning. • May become preoccupied with death. • May feel that something they have done or said has caused the death • Magical thinking – make up fantasies to fill gaps in knowledge
<p>5-9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to see death as irreversible, with all functions ended. • Begin to see as unavoidable and universal – still do not see it as a possibility for themselves. • Concrete thinking and the understanding of the causes of death. • Can understand as a result of external causes – accidents and violence and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The death undermines their security and their world becomes unreliable and unsafe. Feeling insecure • Fears abandonment and separation, anxious reactions. • Loud protest, despair. • Annoyed at changes in patterns or routines. • Sleep problems, bad dreams • May revert to 'baby' behaviours.



	<p>as a result of inner processes such as disease and old age.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• May have magical thinking – may assume the dead person can see or hear the living.• Will watch adults’ reactions to grief and will sometimes deny their own feelings to protect the adult.• Age of fear and fantasy – may become curious about rituals surrounding death.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression• Anger, guilt, temper tantrums, nightmares• Behaviour, learning or school problems.• Perfect child, brave and in control.• May become preoccupied with death.• Look for reassurance that they will be valued, loved and continue to be cared for and that the family will survive.• May think of death as being something spooky, zombies or spirits that will come and get you• May become very curious about what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body over time.• Experience strong fears for the wellbeing of the surviving relatives• May be concerned about how the dead person will eat or keep warm.• Often have a great reduction of self-esteem.• Pressure to perform and succeed in school can be stressful.• Sometimes are teased by peers about not having a mother or father.• Often feel “different” = feeling lonely and rejected.
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May develop tummy pains, headaches or just not feel well.
9- Adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand that death is final, inevitable and universal. • May lead to possibility of own death – frightening prospect. • Beginning to grieve more as an adult does – may deny feeling of sense of loss to and ‘get on with life’. • May produce psychosomatic symptoms. • More able to think logically – if they feel guilty, they are able to reverse their thinking • More able to use defences against disquieting emotions – active engagement in school, sports and friendships. • Will understand the long-term consequences of the loss of the relationship. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The death undermines their security and their world becomes unreliable and unsafe. Feeling insecure • Fears abandonment and separation. • Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression • Anger, guilt, temper tantrums, nightmares • Behaviour, learning or school problems. • Perfect child, brave and in control. • May become preoccupied with death. • Still find it hard to talk about illness/death. • Other adults become important – teachers, nurses and club leaders. • Have a strong desire to be brave to cover sad feelings. • May feel singled out or different. • Acquisition of knowledge and skills at school continues to be central development task but they have difficulty concentrating. • Can be very angry and not able to express in a good way
Teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept of death becomes more abstract. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The death undermines their security and their world

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to understand the long-term consequences of a loss. • May reflect on justice / injustice of death. • Together with biological, psychological and social changes that take place at this age, this may lead to strong reactions. • Expectations of peers become an important influence. If other children do not know how to react this can leave adolescent feeling isolated. 	<p>becomes unreliable and unsafe. Feeling insecure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression. • Anger, rejection • Joking, sarcasm • Dependence or regressing to younger age • Insecurity, low self-esteem. • Strong reactions – may have suicidal thoughts • May experience social pressures to take up more adult roles – fulfilling roles and duties of the present
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PHEW!!! You may read the above and feel overwhelmed at what may lie ahead and the possible reactions that your children might experience, whilst also feeling crushed by your own grief. However, it's important to remember that despite the unimaginable grief you are feeling, you as a parent/carer are enough, you are one of the best resources your child has.

*Please note that children with developmental delays or children with disabilities or additional needs may process their grief at a different rate. Every child is unique so this table should only be used as a guideline.

Uniqueness of Grief and Mourning - Practical Tips

Children, like adults, are unique in how they grieve. Your child will be grieving their relationship with their loved one and everything that they held dear as well as their physical presence and place attachment (the places where they used to visit them) amongst other things. For the first time life may feel very unsafe because everything they knew to be real and true is now different. Here are some further tips/practical help:

Young children are concrete thinkers seeing things exactly as they appear and hearing things literally. It is therefore so important that those supporting the children are honest with them - in their use of language especially. Child Bereavement UK quote that "It can be really distressing and uncomfortable as adults to talk about death especially when you are

grieving too. However, what is happening for your child right now you cannot change.” We can be very clear in our use of words to ensure that your child doesn’t become confused.

As adults your main concern is to protect them of course but please, if you can, avoid using euphemisms like these:

We have lost them
They have passed away
They have slipped away
They have gone to a magical place
They have gone to a better place



These phrases may not be understood by young children and may even generate fears of going to sleep and not waking up, or fears of going out because they might not come back (like their loved one who has died). Indeed, they could also fear that they may get lost or that magically their loved one will reappear.

Be prepared for them to continue to ask where their loved one is or when they are coming back. This will of course be so hard to listen to, but it is really important to continue to give clear messages which can be softened with the knowledge that memories last forever. Young children will need concrete, specific explanations about the physical realities of their loved one dying, for example he/she will no longer be able to see them, his/her body stopped working and the doctors didn’t have any medicine to make them better.

Always acknowledging their feelings in the process. “It seems like you are feeling so very sad today, are you feeling sad? or “You look very cross today, is that how you are feeling?” Validating their feelings and being heard will make such a difference. Similarly, answer their questions as honestly as you can and show them that it’s OK to feel sad, scared, or happy even if it feels easier to show your children you are “strong” and “brave”, As difficult as it might be, if they see you showing these feelings openly it will validate their own feelings. It will show them that it’s OK to feel that way too. Check what their understanding is and **how** much they understand.

Children will know for sure that something is happening around them and that people are feeling sad, awkward, angry. It’s important for adults if they can to model this for them. If you are finding it difficult to answer, then give the question back to them, ask “What do you

think?” Again, this is important in the grieving process and this will help to get an idea where their understanding is.

Remember of course that they may be unable to tell you how they are feeling, instead you could mirror their actions, and give a name to that feeling. This will also help with their emotional intelligence. Because young children can't always vocalise their feelings, their thoughts and fears often will come out at unexpected times, like in their play. Remember that play can be the language of childhood, so school could be a good opportunity to give them the opportunity to play, if they can, and be alert to what they might be trying to tell them.

Similarly, some young children might revert to immature behaviours (baby talk or thumb-sucking, wanting a dummy) or become clingy or irritable. Others might act out with angry outbursts. Remember that these changes in behaviour are likely manifestations of unexpressed emotions like confusion or frustration. Common reactions to death in school-aged children may include difficulty concentrating in school, problems sleeping and recurrent thoughts about the death. School-aged children may complain of physical reactions like tummy aches and headaches. Be kind, be thoughtful and always try to think about what it is that they are trying to tell you.

It is very common during bereavement for children (and adults) to believe they are to blame and feel guilty for what happened, it could be something as simple as, “I shouted at them before they died.” If this appears to be happening for your child - just **reassure, reassure, reassure**. Reassure them that nothing they said or did (or didn't say or do) caused the death and importantly that nothing they do can bring them back. Your child may also become worried that they too may die and those others that they love around them may also die. This can cause huge anxiety.

Why did they die?

This, in my experience, is one of the most difficult questions to answer and can leave the adults lost for words, not in the least because they are also struggling to understand why their loved one has died. You could explain to the child that most people die because they are old and important parts of their bodies wear out and then stop working, but sometimes people die because:

- They are/were so ill that their doctors were not/are not able to make them better
- An accident has happened, like a car crash or a fire.
- Someone else has made them die, the word for this is murder.

- Sometimes for many different reasons people take their own lives. This is called suicide.
- Some people die because their country is at war or there is a famine and there is not enough food for everyone.
- A sudden unexpected event such as an earthquake or flood can also cause death.

What More Can I do to Help?

Key Stage 1 (2-4)

At this age you may find the child asking questions such as:

“When is Coming home?”

“Where has Gone?”

“Why are you crying?”

What they may need

- To be reassured that the death was not their fault.
- They cannot cope with roundabout talking.
- They need clear specific concrete words like “Mummy has died.”
- Specific reasons why?
- If you don’t know, be honest.
- It’s ok to keep asking questions as they try to make sense of what has happened.
- Reading books on death and loss, drawing and playing can help to bring out worries, concerns they may have.

Key Stage 1 (5-7)

At this age the questions may be like these:

“Will die too?”

“Was it my fault?”

“Who will take me to football?”

“Can see me?”

“What happens to the body?”

What they may need

- To be able to talk or express specific worries and negative thoughts can give them confidence to be in charge of them.
- To know that what they are feeling is normal. It's ok to express feelings.
- Routines to be maintained.
- Gently acknowledging that it hurts when someone important dies.

Key Stage 2 (8-11)

At this age children may focus their questions in ways such as these:

“Why do I get headaches and pain in my body?”

“Why was I not told was so sick?”

“I am trying to get on with my life”

“Can you catch cancer?”

What they may need

- Sports and after school activities can build confidence and self-esteem.
- Good, clear information.
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the family.
- Assurance that their feelings are normal/natural

The Funeral/Memorial Service:

It can be helpful for children to feel like they are part of the funeral planning. This could be something like choosing the flowers that the person may have liked, maybe a specific type of flower or their favourite colours. They may like to write a letter to their loved one, especially if the death happened suddenly and there are things they would have liked to say. They may like to be part of choosing what their loved one is wearing, or they may like to give them something to have with them such as a teddy bear. By including them in these decisions and conversations they can feel valued and that their relationship was special.

If the service has already been planned and a thorough discussion has taken place, it is recommended that the child is given the choice of whether they would like to attend. Answering questions that children have will help them to feel welcome, but some children will still opt not to attend. Either choice is ok. It is very important to prepare children in advance by telling them as **specifically** as possible what will happen. (*Change the sample explanations below to fit your plans and special traditions/religious traditions.*)

“ ____ will be taken from _____, where he died, to the funeral home.
At the funeral home, ____ will be dressed in clothes that he/she liked and put into a coffin. A coffin is a box we use so that when ____ is buried in the ground, no dirt will get on him. Because ____’s body isn’t working any more, his/her body won’t move or do any of the things it used to do.
If you like, you can go to the funeral home and visit for a while.

If your child/young person chooses to visit, explain any change in appearance due to illness, weight loss, or trauma. “It’s still Granddad’s body, but you know he was sick and lost a lot of weight so he will look thinner...”

After ____ days, we will have a special ceremony to remember _____ it’s called a funeral and it will be on _____ at _____. At that time, the coffin will be closed.

Provide information about who will attend and what people might say or do at the service. Describe the room in the funeral home or chapel: room, music, flowers, paintings or religious symbols. Give details of what to expect if viewing the body in an open coffin at the service. This is especially helpful for young children to grasp that the person is, in fact, dead. Explain that the person will be lying down, not moving, and what they will be wearing.

On the day of the funeral, _____’s coffin will be brought in followed by us and the people that have also come. The coffin is placed on the catafalque (a raised and decorated

platform). Then there is a funeral service; either religious or secular (see below). This is a time when we can talk about _____ if we want to, other people there might also want to talk about their memories of _____, sing hymns and songs to remember him/her. Then _____'s coffin won't be able to be seen anymore. There will be curtains that will close around it and sometimes the coffin is lowered from sight or withdrawn through a gateway. Then everybody leaves the chapel.

Burial (If applicable, add to the above information about the service.): After the service, _____ will be buried in a hole in the ground in a spot that _____ picked out. You could bring something to leave in the coffin with _____ if you want.”

Cremation: “Once we have left, _____ body will be placed in a very, very hot small room which removes all the water from the body and turns it to ash. The body is not burned in flames. Then we will take those ashes and _____ (scatter them, keep them in an urn, etc.). Since _____'s body doesn't work and doesn't feel anything, being cremated doesn't hurt.

Remember, if you can

1. **Be open and honest with your child.** Explain, age-appropriately and using clear language, why the person died. We can find it difficult to say the words and tend to use softer expressions such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep'. These expressions can be confusing for young children as they may believe loved ones will come back.
2. **Answer all the difficult questions** about death and loss even though it is likely to be painful and uncomfortable. It's okay to not have all the answers, feel comfortable in saying you don't know. Be prepared for your child to continuously ask the same questions. Going over it again can help them to process their loss and gain reassurance.
3. **Listen to how your child is feeling.** If they blame themselves, reassure them that it's not their fault.
4. **Reassure your child** that you're always there for them, as they might be worried about being alone or feel abandoned.
5. **Don't be afraid to express your own emotions.** By showing grief you are encouraging your child to express theirs too. Spend as much time as possible helping your child to show their feelings openly – their sadness, anger and anxiety will come out over time and at unexpected times.
6. **Sometimes they 'forget'** and believe the person is still alive. This is normal in the first few weeks but can be a problem if it persists. If the problem persists – seek counselling support.
7. **Prepare your child for the changes** they may face. The death of a loved one can have a huge impact on the family's routine and structure. Ease any worries such as who will pick them up from school.
8. **Talk to your child about how they want to say goodbye.** Some alternatives could be lighting a candle, letting off balloons, saying a prayer or poem, writing a letter, making a memory box, planting a shrub, visiting the grave or another special place.
9. **Help them make a memory box of photos,** films, drawings, some clothing, favourite perfume/aftershave and other significant items. This can be a huge source of comfort.
10. **Acknowledge upcoming anniversaries** and share ideas with your child about how you can commemorate these.

11. **Take care of yourself.** Allow yourself time and space to grieve for your own loss. The more you look after yourself, the better able you will be to support your child
12. **Give your child choice.** There is no “best” or “right” time to access support for children/young people who experience bereavement. You can make your child aware of the different support options that they can access - if age appropriate of course. It is also important to reassure them that they can access support in their own time

If you feel like you or a child needs support then you may also find it helpful to read stories with them which may help them to understand. Please see the book list attached which details some suggestions you may like to try. You may also find it helpful to visit the following websites which may provide you with further information:

- www.winstonswish.org
- www.cruse.org.uk
- www.childbereavementuk.org
- www.autism.org.uk
- www.youngminds.org.uk
- www.themix.org.uk
- www.seesaw.org.uk

You can also contact our Wellbeing Team for support by emailing wellbeing@havenshospices.org.uk or calling 01702 220321

Sources: Child Bereavement UK/cruse.org.uk/All-free-download.com/Google Images