



**East Ayrshire Psychological Services:
Advice for Parents & Carers
Supporting a Grieving Child during Covid -19**

This advice is written to signpost you to some helpful resources for your family at this difficult time. Supporting a child who has experienced a significant loss or bereavement is difficult at the best of times, especially when we ourselves are also grieving the loss. In addition, the current situation can bring anxiety and uncertainty for all of us and many of the familiar support networks we would typically rely on during times of stress are unavailable or limited.

A child's understanding around a death will be dependent upon their developmental stage. However we know that even tiny babies notice when someone who cared for them is missing. As much as we may want to protect our children from what has happened, it is important that children are given factual, age appropriate information to help them understand. The following link may be helpful in gauging how much a child can understand about death according to their age:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=6c118a29-2f1a-4024-ba9e-c44701b1ff3e>

Talking to children about a death

Dr Bruce Perry has used his expertise about stress and brain development to answer some questions that many parents and carers may have following a bereavement. The following excerpts come from '*The Child's Loss: Death, Grief and Mourning*' (Perry & Rosenfelt).

1. Should I talk about the death?

Children do not benefit from 'not thinking about it' or 'putting it out of their minds.' If a child senses that you are upset about the event, she may not bring it up even if she wants to. Children model their emotional expression and behaviour after their parent/carer. It can be very helpful for a child to know that you feel sad and for you to share with them how you cope with your sadness – "Sometimes, I miss Daddy so much. I get so sad and just cry. And whenever that happens, I remember how happy he was when you were born. Do you remember the time you and Daddy...." Overtime, helping the child keep part of the loved one with them in memories, rituals, habits, beliefs and behaviours can be very useful. The formal mourning rituals and beliefs of your culture or religion can be very helpful for children.

2. How should I talk about the death?

Use age-appropriate language and explanations. Timing is important. Remember that immediately following the death, the child will not be very capable of processing complex or abstract information. Invite them to come and talk to you anytime they want. And from then on, let the child take the lead as to when, how long and how much you talk with them about the loss. As the child gets further away from the event, they will be able to focus longer, digest more and make more sense of what has happened. Listen to the child, answer their questions as best as you can. It is ok to tell children that you do not know why something happened or that you get confused and upset by it, too. In the end, listening and comforting a child without avoiding or over-reacting will have positive, long-lasting effects on the child's ability to cope with the loss.

3. Should I talk to others about the traumatic event?

Yes. Provided it is appropriate, inform key people in the child's world what has happened. Discuss this with the child. This can help the people in the child's life be more patient, understanding or nurturing.

4. How long should grieving last?

Grief is a term for the set of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physical reactions that are seen following the death or loss of a loved one. Normal grief responses may include denial, emotional numbing, anger, rage, anxiety, sadness, fear, confusion, difficulty sleeping, regression in children, 'stomach' upset and loss of appetite. The grieving process is normal and unique to every individual. Whilst it is impossible to put a timescale on it, if the symptoms listed above persist beyond six months or if they interfere with any aspect of functioning, they need to be considered further.

What can I do to help my child?

- *Try to be honest, open and clear – give child the facts appropriate for their level of understanding*
- *Try not to avoid the topic when the child brings it up - be available when the child wants to talk but avoid probing when the child doesn't want to talk*
- *Be prepared to discuss the same details again and again*
- *Try to be available, nurturing, reassuring and predictable. The child has, in some sense, a life long task of working, re-working - experiencing and re-experiencing the loss of these loved ones.*
- *Understand that surviving children may feel guilty. The guilt children feel is related to the false assumptions they make about the event. Guilt, as expressed in children, may often be best observed in behaviours and emotions that are related to self-hatred and self-destruction.*
- *Look after yourself and take advantage of resources available to support bereaved families. Remember that whilst the child's loss never goes away, over time it should become easier to bear in ways that will not interfere with their development.*

An example of a time line of grief adapted from Bruce Perry. Adaptation to loss is often not a linear process.

Shock. Hard to have long conversations. Hard to concentrate, trouble sleeping, hard to do things they use to do, feels like time is standing still.

People think time has passed so they should be getting a little better

Getting harder to do things, may be losing weight, things may feel worse

People think even more time has passed so they should be getting better

It's been a year, surely you're better?

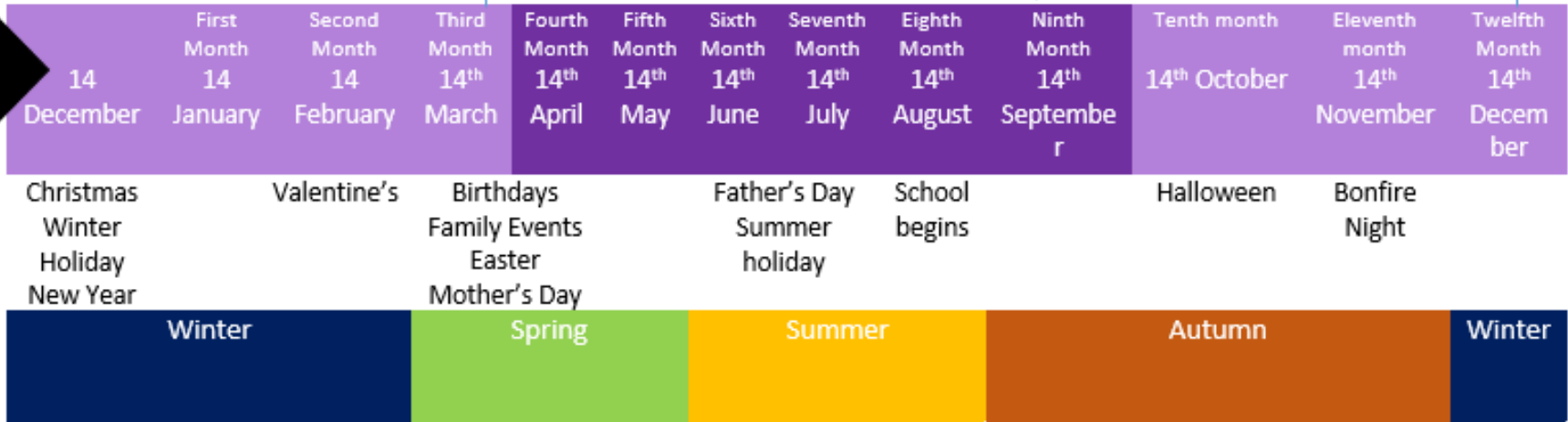
Date of Loss

3 months

9 months

Trying to survive. Still can only take one day at a time.

1 year



Past Memories What were we doing last year at this time? Past memories of what we liked to do, go, favourite things, places to go, holidays etc.



Should be Memories What we should be doing. They should be at family events, they should be in school, they should be moving on, they should be at my birthday party etc.



Where can I access information & support?

Winston's Wish are a UK charity dedicated to supporting children following the death of a parent or sibling. They have online chat rooms and a free telephone helpline for parents and carers looking for advice and support **08088 020 021**

Winston's Wish have expertise and resources to support children and families through a range of losses including bereavement through accident, illness, suicide and murder.

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Resources for parents of children with Additional Support Needs

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-children-with-send/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-children-with-send/> Their book 'We All Grieve' offers practical advice for adults supporting children with additional support needs.

Supporting children under 5

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/early-years-supporting-bereaved-children>

Winston's Wish have published a book '*Never too young to grieve: Supporting children under 5 after the death of a parent*'. The book is aimed at parents/carers supporting a young child following the death of a parent, however, the guidance would apply to any significant loss that a young child experiences.

<https://shop.winstonswish.org/collections/books/products/never-too-young-to-grieve>

Supporting your child's needs as time goes on

Research tells us that the majority of grieving children have their needs met by trusted, familiar adults, without the need for accessing specialist support. In addition to the support offered by parents/carers and other family members, school can also provide vital reassurance and support, and also a sense of routine and predictability.

It is worth remembering that grieving is a natural response to a significant loss or change. Every child's experience of grief will be different, and will include many, different feelings including fear, worry and sadness. There are no limits on how long the grieving process takes and it is likely that there will be triggers which will make a child revisit their loss.

It's really helpful if you can contact your child(ren)'s school or ECC initially to let them know that your child has experienced a loss or bereavement. This will allow staff to plan how best to support your child. East Ayrshire school staff have worked hard over the years to implement many different supports in our schools and ECCs to promote the mental health and wellbeing of all our children and young people. These supports focus on nurture, feeling connected and building resilience, all important factors in helping children to manage following a loss or bereavement. It is also worth getting back in touch with the school or ECC if you feel your child is struggling to manage the feelings associated with their loss as there may be additional supports available to help them either in school or from other local organisations.

Self-Care for parents/carers

Following a bereavement it is vital to look after your own health and well-being in ensuring you have the space and time to process and deal with your own loss. We know this can be easier said than done. By looking after yourself you will be better able to support your child. Try to ensure you eat and sleep well. Seek

solace in those that are close to you and don't be afraid to seek professional advice or support. Reading about grief and how it can present over time can help equip parents and carers of the potential road ahead. This knowledge will allow you to navigate the coming days and months with a greater level of confidence and understanding.

If you still have worries or concerns, contact your child's school or ECC and they can ensure the appropriate Educational Psychologist contacts you for a discussion.

Resources & Supports Available in Scotland

Childhood Bereavement UK – support and advice for families, children and young people
www.childbereavementuk.org 0800 0288840

NB. Additional resources including a short film about supporting bereaved children during the COVID 19 pandemic www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children

Young Minds www.youngminds.org.uk Parent helpline 08088025544

Childline 24hour national helpline (free) for children and young people covers all issues 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk

Young Scot: provides a wealth of information to help support young people.
<https://young.scot/campaigns/national/coronavirus>

Cruse: information on dealing with bereavement and grief during COVID 19
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

Samaritans: 116 123. A free and confidential support to anyone, any age

Breathing Space – phoneline for anyone experiencing low mood or anxiety - 0800838587

Winston's Wish – charity to support bereaved children and young people. Website with advice and support
www.winstonswish.org.uk 08088020021

Children 1st Kinship Care Service – support and advice for kinship carers to meet needs of children and young people – 08000282233