



# HEALTHIER MINDS

## EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

**COVID-19: A Community Approach to Supporting Bereavement, Loss and Grief**



The Prince & Princess  
of Wales Hospice



## Bereavement, Grief and Loss and COVID-19






The current Coronavirus restrictions are having an ever increasing impact on our daily lives and feelings of grief and loss are likely to be heightened as we experience the separation from loved ones and the loss of our routines. Even more challenging, however, is how we grieve the death of a loved one when restrictions limit our ability to connect with other people. Whether related to COVID-19 or not, a bereavement during this time of isolation and social distancing will create new challenges and it is important to find alternative ways to grieve and be with those closest to us.

### **Supporting Bereaved Children and Young People**








It is always important to discuss death openly and truthfully with a child or young person. This is no different now particularly as young people may be more anxious and upset by the uncertainty around COVID-19 and the impact on their day to day life. Following a death, they may worry that they or other friends and family members will also become ill or die. Encourage children to talk about how they are feeling, to ask questions and answer them as honestly as you can or help them to find the answers. Children understand death very differently depending on their age and developmental stage but a child is never too young to experience loss. It is natural to worry about a child's behaviour following a bereavement but the following behaviours are common.

### **Grief Response by Developmental Stage**

#### ***Children from birth to 2 years:***

-  have no understanding of death
-  are aware of separation and will grieve the absence of a parent or carer
-  may respond with increased crying, decreased responsiveness, and changes in eating or sleeping
-  may keep looking or asking for a missing parent or carer and wait for him or her to return
-  are most affected by the sadness of surviving family members

#### ***Children from 2 - 5 years:***

-  are curious about death and believe death is temporary or reversible
-  are naturally egocentric and see themselves as the cause of events around them so may feel responsible for the death
-  may see death as the person is sleeping
-  understand the world as a mix of reality and fantasy
-  may think that they can make the deceased come back if they are good enough
-  will worry about who will take care of them and about being abandoned
-  cannot put their feelings into words and instead react to loss through behaviours such as irritability, aggression, physical symptoms, difficulty sleeping, or regression (such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking)

### ***Children from 6 - 9 years:***

- understand that death is final, but see it as something that happens only to other people
- may think of death as a person or a spirit, like a ghost, angel, or a skeleton and will ask questions in relation to this
- are often interested in the specific details of death and what happens to the body after death
- may experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness
- continue to have difficulty expressing their feelings and may react through behaviours such as physical symptoms, withdrawal from friends, aggression and regression
- still worry about who will take care of them and will likely experience insecurity, clinginess, and fear of abandonment

### ***Children from 10 – 12 years:***

- by age 10 children understand that death is universal, unavoidable, and will happen to them
- will experience a range of emotions and will start to worry about their own death
- are likely to ask a lot of questions

### ***Adolescents and Adults***

- have an adult understanding of the concept of death, but do not have the experiences, coping skills or behaviour of an adult
- may 'act out' in anger or show impulsive or reckless behaviours, such as substance misuse or fighting
- may experience a wide range of emotions, but not know how to handle them or feel comfortable expressing them
- the reality of death contradicts a teenager's view of himself or herself as invincible, and teenagers may question their faith or their understanding of the world
- developmental issues of independence and separation from parents can interfere with the ability to receive support from adult family members
- copng strategies may create tension with family members, as adolescents may cope by spending more time with friends or by withdrawing from the family to be alone

## **Supporting Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs**

Supporting bereaved children with additional support needs presents particular challenges. Death is such an abstract concept and hard for all of us to comprehend. For a child or young person with learning needs, it is even more difficult. A child's difficulties in understanding and communicating can make it hard for adults to identify and respond to a child or young person's grief. Yet whatever their age or ability, a child's experience of grief and its consequences are just as significant and their emotional, physical and behavioural responses are very likely to change. Sometimes these changes may not be apparent straight away but emerge over time. This means that there is no set formula to help – but that the support we offer should be based on those who know and care for the child being sensitive to these changes. The support should help to enhance a child's sense of safety and security and provide them with avenues and activities which enable them to communicate how they are feeling.

### **Funerals and Memorials**

Attending funerals, memorials and other end of life ceremonies are an important part of grieving as they allow family and friends to come together and to say goodbye to the deceased. Social distancing restrictions limit the ability of people to come together and many will miss the opportunity to visit someone who is dying and attend an end of life ceremony. It is important that people still have the opportunity to celebrate the life of someone who has died, to say goodbye and to remember that person in different ways until such time that funerals can be attended again.

We are fortunate that advances in technology allow us to continue to connect virtually with others. A video call cannot take the place of a hug and physical comfort but it can ensure we maintain some form of connection and reminding ourselves that this is temporary can bring some comfort. Utilising this technology can allow groups of people to share memories, photographs, favourite music, stories, poems etc.

### **Ways to Remember While Social Distancing**

**Talk to people** even if you can't be physically close to them. Take time to remember the person who has died and share stories. Talk to others about how you are feeling and don't be afraid to ask for help.

**Make a memory book, jar or box** and fill with a variety of items which remind you of the deceased person or your memories together including:

- photographs
- possessions
- poems
- playlist of favourite songs
- letters





**Plant a tree or flowers** – this can allow you to have your own memorial while also creating a focal point for remembering the person in the future.

**Express your grief** through art, poetry, photography, music, writing, baking etc. Everyone will find comfort in different mediums and creatively expressing thoughts and feelings can be a therapeutic way of releasing some of the pain of the loss.

**Create an online space** for people to come together to remember e.g. on Facebook where people can contribute stories and memories.

**Plan a memorial** for the future when family and friends can come together to remember and celebrate a life.

#### **Key Points for Supporting a Bereaved Child or Young Person during COVID-19**

-  Encourage the child to express their feelings and remember the person who has died either through talking or creative means.
-  Take time to listen and answer questions as truthfully as possible. Use clear language such as 'he died' rather than 'he passed away'.
-  Allow a break from grief. Encourage children to play and connect with friends and reassure them that it's ok to enjoy themselves and to not feel sad all the time.
-  Take care of yourself. Make sure you have your own ways to express your grief and to remember the person.

**Fiction and Non Fiction Books for Bereaved Children and Young People  
(Ages are provided as a guide only)**

**Books for Young Children (Preschool up to about age 7)**

I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas

Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley

When Uncle Bob Died (Talking it Through) by Althea

Paper Dolls by Julia Donaldson

Dear Grandma Bunny by Dick Bruna

Always and Forever by Alan Durant

Fred by Posy Simmonds

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney by Judith Viorst.

When Someone Very Special Dies by Marge Heegard

**Books for Children aged 7 and older**

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine by Diana Crossley

Michael Rosen's SAD Book by Michael Rosen

What on Earth do you do when Someone Dies? By Trevor Romain

When Someone Very Special Dies by Marge Heegard

A Birthday Present for Daniel by Juliet Rothman

Flamingo Dream by Donna Jo Napoli

The Cat Mummy by Jacqueline Wilson

Milly's Bug Nut by Jill Janney

Luna's Red Hat: An Illustrated Storybook to Help Children Cope with Loss and Suicide (6+) by

Emmi Smid

Finding a Way Through When Someone Close has Died – workbook developed by children and young people by Mood & Whittaker

## **Books For older children**

Ways to Live Forever by Sally Nichols

Grief Encounter by Shelley Gilbert

The Lost Boys Appreciation Society by Alan Gibbons

Before I Die by Jenny Downham

Two Weeks with the Queen by Morris Gleitzman

Vicky Angel by Jacqueline Wilson

Ostrich Boys by Keith Gray

## **For Children with Additional Support Needs**

[https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/cornwall/fsd/files/supporting\\_people\\_with\\_disabilities\\_coping\\_with\\_grief\\_and\\_loss.pdf](https://search3.openobjects.com/mediamanager/cornwall/fsd/files/supporting_people_with_disabilities_coping_with_grief_and_loss.pdf)

When Mum Died/When Dad Died by Sheila Hollins [www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk/books](http://www.booksbeyondwords.co.uk/books)

Finding Your Own Way to Grieve: A Creative Activity Workbook for Kids and Teens on the Autism Spectrum by Karla Helbert

Website (with accompanying book) with information and practical tips on breaking bad news to people with learning disabilities and or autism: <http://www.breakingbadnews.org/>

National Autistic Society online remembrance book: [www.theonlinebookcompany.com/nasbook](http://www.theonlinebookcompany.com/nasbook)

PAMIS Bereavement and Loss Learning Resource Pack for those supporting bereaved people with profound and multiple Learning disabilities: <http://pamis.org.uk/resources/bereavement-and-loss/>

## **The following websites can provide additional support and advice**

**Childhood Bereavement UK:** has produced a short film, supporting bereaved children during difficult times. <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children>

**Young Scot:** provides a wealth of information to help support young people during COVID 19 <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>

**Beyond Words:** when someone dies from corona virus: a guide for families and carers. <https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/downloads-shop/when-someone-dies-from-coronavirus>