



# HEALTHIER MINDS

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

**A Community Approach to  
Supporting Bereavement,  
Loss and Grief**



**Guidance for Early Years Staff**

*East Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service*



This guidance is for the use of Early Years staff who are supporting children and families who have experienced a loss or bereavement. It is adapted from the Healthier Minds: A Community Approach to Supporting Bereavement, Loss and Grief. Guidance for Educational Establishments. Further information, this document and other supporting resources can be found at <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/meetinglearnerneeds/support-for-health-and-wellbeing/support-for-bereavement-and-loss/>

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## Role of ELC Staff in Supporting Children and Families

A child's ELC provides a safe place to play, create, discuss and explore feelings of loss, but staff may be reluctant to engage in these conversations due to a lack of confidence. They may be concerned about making the situation worse or saying the wrong thing.

The following principles should be embedded in practice to aid staff's thinking when supporting bereaved children:

### Normality

For the majority of children suffering a significant change in their life, the routines of nursery can give a sense of normality. The familiarity of attending nursery with familiar people offers a sense of security, continuity and reassurance. It is good to maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility.

### Relief from Grief

The early years environment can provide relief from a tense and emotionally charged atmosphere at home. Children may feel overwhelmed by the grief expressed by family members. Alternatively, family members may attempt to not express grief in front of the child. Even very young children, however, can sense and will react to the emotions of others.

### Nurture and Connection

Young children often worry that other adults in their life will also die or leave or that they are to blame for the death and so it is important that children are reassured that they are loved, they are not responsible and will be looked after. A close attachment with at least one adult will reduce the impact of a loss or bereavement. Attunement is key in this relationship to ensure the adult can respond to the changing needs of the child. It is normal for young children to jump between periods of sadness and their normal behaviour so the adult has an important role in encouraging fun and play, providing comfort when required and taking time to answer the child's questions as honestly as possible.

### **Remember:**

**Answer questions as honestly as you can.**

**Use clear language such as 'dead' 'death' 'dying' and avoid euphemisms such as 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep'.**

## Developing Resilience

Create opportunities to discuss issues surrounding loss, bereavement and grief. While it is not possible to fully prepare children for death and the impact that bereavement can have, children can develop resilience and coping strategies through stories, activities and discussions. You will find example lesson plans in the appendix. It will be useful to have a selection of resources on the subject of loss and death available. Books, film clips and discussing personal experiences are all effective ways to gently introduce the concept of loss.

## Home-ELC Communication

Systems should be in place to keep in contact with home. Discuss plans for returning to nursery or school and keep in touch about progress and supports. Grieving children can present differently across settings. Good communication will ensure that a more realistic picture of how the child is coping is shared and planned for. Discuss with the parents what the child knows about the death so that you are both providing consistent information and answers to the child's questions.

## Supporting Parents

Parents will often seek support and reassurance from ELC staff in terms of how their child is managing. But, they may also seek support for their own grief. In these situations accept that you can't fix the situation or make the person feel better but you can listen. Reassure parents that it is normal for their child to experience a full range of emotions, to regress in some behaviours, to ask a lot of questions and at other times behave as if nothing has happened.

**[The Day Becca Died](#)** is a short clip which can help parents supporting a bereaved child.

## Taking Care of Yourself

Talking to a child about loss or the death of someone close may be one of the hardest things a staff member will ever have to do. It may produce painful emotions and memories and SMTs must ensure there are formal and informal systems in place to support staff who are providing this support to children and families.








## Administrative Considerations

Ensure the names and contact details of the deceased person are removed to avoid any accidental correspondence. Special events for example, birthdays, Christmas, Mother's and Father's Day may be particularly difficult so it is important staff are made aware of the loss

even many years after. Pass on information at times of transition to ensure future staff members are aware of the circumstances and can provide further supports as necessary.

Remember to practice Active Listening:

### Do's

-  Find a private space to talk
-  Present an open body stance and non-verbal signals to demonstrate you are listening
-  Listen in an accepting, non-judgemental way
-  Echo and reflect back what has been said
-  Tolerate silences
-  Offer reassurances about the normality of grief reactions
-  Encourage parents to talk to their children about the death

“I’m so sorry to hear about the death of your mum”



“It must have been so hard for you”

“I can imagine what a shock it would have been”

“It sounds like you have had trouble sleeping since it happened”

“It’s normal for (your child) to still look for her grandpa. It might help if you can all talk about him when you’re ready”

### Avoid

-  Offering advice or solutions unless specifically asked for
-  Using comments like “I know how you are feeling” (even if you have experienced a similar loss)



## How Preschool Children Understand and Experience Death

At this stage of development children believe that death is reversible or temporary. They may also be convinced that it was something that they said or did which caused the person to die. Abstract concepts are not easily grasped, and so it is important that the child is spoken to in very **concrete terms**. In order to make sense of what has happened children at this age may often ask the same questions over and over again.

### **Key Points**

#### **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
- are still greatly affected by the sadness of surviving family members
- 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)



“She kept asking if Papa would be back for her birthday.”



Parent of a 3 year old

## Ways for Young Children to Remember

*Finding ways to remember isn't only important after a death. Any loss, for example moving house, parents separating or a friend moving away, can be helped by finding creative ways to remember and cherish.*

### **Memory Book, Box or Jar**

Use a book, box or jar as a record and reminder. It could also be used more generally to highlight significant moments. The child might choose mementos which show:

-  happy events or occasions
-  messages and memories
-  photographs
-  possessions

This record can then be used to demonstrate the role of the person had in the child's life. This role will also be seen in a more general context of life progression as items can be added over time.

### **Play**

It is normal and helpful for children to explore and process their feelings and events through play. They may do this through imaginative play with toys or role play with peers and it can be a helpful way for children to remember happy times with loved ones.

### **Planting Trees or Plants**






Planting a tree or plant can be a good way of remembering the person who has died and provides a focal point for commemorating the life and death of the person.

### **Be Creative – artwork, photography, crafts, baking, poetry, songs**

Making something in memory of someone special or making it for that person helps us to feel connected to them and provides the bereaved person with something to treasure in the future. Everyone will find comfort in different mediums so explore which ones suit the child best.

## Introducing the Themes of Loss and Death in a Preschool Setting

**Aims: To enable children to explore their natural interest in ageing, death and dying.**








-  become more aware of the permanence of death
-  become aware of some of the language associated with death and dying
-  become more familiar with the concept of loss and change
-  develop some strategies for coping when sad things happen
-  appreciate the importance of remembering happy times with dead people or pets

### Thinking About Change

#### **Resources**

-  2 puppets or cuddly toys

#### **Activities**

-  Act out a scenario where something has changed for the puppet or toy e.g. friend has moved away, moved house, moved nursery
-  Ask the children to predict how the puppet might feel about the change
-  Ask the children if anything has changed for them, how they felt, who helped them? What helped?
-  If the children are unsure, use the other puppet to make suggestions
-  Model responses by using your own experience of change
-  Encourage the children to think of ways to help the puppet remember the way things were e.g. draw a picture, make a memories jar
-  Finish with a focus on things we can do when sad things happen to make us feel better










## Thinking About Loss

### Resources

-  2 puppets or cuddly toys
-  [Berenstain Bears clip about loss](#) – watch from 11:35 The Baby Chipmunk (roughly 10 mins long)

### Activities



-  Act out a scenario where one of the puppets or toys has lost something – a toy, a favourite jumper etc
-  Ask the children to predict how the puppet might feel about losing the item
-  Ask the children if they have ever lost something and how they felt, who helped them? What helped?
-  If the children are unsure use the other puppet to make suggestions
-  Model responses by using your own experience of loss
-  Encourage the children to think of ways to help the puppet remember the toy e.g. draw a picture of it, make a memories jar
-  Try to finish with a focus on things we can do when sad things happen to make us feel better

## Thinking About Emotions

### Resources



-  Any non-fiction book (see recommendations)

### Activities









-  Read the book and as you read, discuss the events of the book and ask the children to predict how the characters might feel, and what helped them
-  Ask the children if they've ever felt sad (modelling own experience where appropriate), what happened, who or what helped them. If any child talks about a personal experience of death, be responsive and validate feelings of sadness and gently encourage them to talk about happy memories.

## Thinking About Death

### Resources

-  A collection of flowers (part of the activity can be for children to find and pick flowers)
-  A collection of objects from the natural world which were once alive, for example, seashells, dried flowers, seed pods, dried roots, bark, drift wood, dead leaves, small dead insects.

### Activities

-  Invite the children to pick up the objects, explore patterns, textures, colours, sounds.
-  Ask children about their understanding of flowers – flower names, colours, favourite colours, why bees like flowers, seasons associated with different flowers.
-  Ask children to predict what will happen to the flower once it has been picked and why. What does the flower need to stay alive? Can it come back to life?
-  How does the idea of the flower dying make the children feel?
-  Monitor the flower and watch how it changes over time – take photos or draw the different stages.
-  Encourage the children to use the words die, change.
-  Ask the children to think of ways to remember the flowers (dried flower collages, photographs, drawings)
-  Introduce the idea of the life cycle and that all living things die – look at other dead things – e.g. insects, leaves.

## Suggested Resources: Preschool

<b>Lesson Plans, Ideas and Activities</b>	
<p><b>Film Clip</b></p> <p><b><u><i>The Day Becca Died</i></u></b></p>	<p>Short clip from Bereavement UK and CBeebies from the perspective of a family. Useful for anyone speaking to young children about death.</p>
<p><b><i>Elephant's Tea Party</i></b></p> <p>Child Bereavement UK</p>	<p>Lesson plans for equipping all children, whether bereaved or not, with the tools to help them cope with loss and bereavement, now or in later life</p> <p><a href="https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/elephants-tea-party">https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/elephants-tea-party</a></p>
<b>DVDS</b>	
<p><b><i>Not Too Young to Grieve</i></b></p> <p>Leeds Animation Workshop</p>	<p>Designed to help parents and carers support children under 5 who have been bereaved. Suitable for viewing by parents with their children or in educational settings. Free downloadable training material also available. Running Time – 14 minutes</p> <p><a href="https://www.leedsanimation.org.uk/films/">https://www.leedsanimation.org.uk/films/</a></p>
<p><b><i>Grief in the Family</i></b></p> <p>Leeds Animation Workshop</p>	<p>Looks at the ways children and young people respond to grief, and what the adults around them can do to help. It gives parents and carers an insight into the process of grieving, its physical and emotional effects, and the needs of children and young people. The video shows families from a wide range of backgrounds dealing with bereavement. It offers practical advice to parents who need to learn how to find support for themselves, while helping their children to express their feelings and handle confusing emotions. Stressing the importance of listening to children and answering their questions honestly, it encourages the development of communication and a supportive family environment. The pack is designed as a resource for those working with families and bereaved children. It raises awareness and facilitates discussion in parenting education classes, training courses or schools. It is also suitable for viewing at home by parents, carers, and children.</p>

<https://www.leedsanimation.org.uk/films/>

## Fiction and Non-Fiction Books for Young Children

<p><b><i>I Miss You: A First Look at Death</i></b></p> <p>Pat Thomas</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 0750260823</p>	<p><b>Non-Fiction</b></p> <p>This reassuring picture book explores the difficult issue of death for young children. Children's feelings and questions about this sensitive subject are looked at in a simple but realistic way. This book helps them to understand their loss and come to terms with it.</p>
<p><b><i>Missing Mummy</i></b></p> <p><i>Rebecca Cobb</i></p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-0230749511</p>	<p>Deals with the loss of a parent from a child's point of view. Perfectly pitched text and evocative artwork explore the many emotions a bereaved child may experience, from anger to guilt and from sadness to bewilderment. And importantly, the book also focuses on the positive - the recognition that the child is still part of a family, and that his memories of his mother are to be treasured.</p>
<p><b><i>Grandad's Island</i></b></p> <p><b>Benji Davies</b></p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-1471119958</p>	<p>At the bottom of Syd's garden is Grandad's house. Syd can let himself in any time he likes. But one day when Syd comes to call, Grandad is in the attic, where he ushers Syd through a door, and the two of them journey to a wild, beautiful island awash in colour where Grandad decides he will remain. So Syd hugs Grandad one last time and sets sail for home. Sure to provide comfort to young children struggling to understand loss.</p>
<p><b><i>Always and Forever</i></b></p> <p>Alan Durant</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-0552567657</p>	<p>When Fox dies the rest of his family are absolutely distraught. How will Mole, Otter and Hare go on without their beloved friend? But, months later, Squirrel reminds them all of how funny Fox used to be, and they realise that Fox is still there in their hearts and memories.</p>
<p><b><i>Badger's Parting Gifts</i></b></p> <p>Susan Varley</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-1849395144</p>	<p>Badger is so old that he knows he must soon die, so he does his best to prepare his friends. When he finally passes away, they are grief-stricken, but one by one they remember the special things he taught them during his life. By sharing their memories, they realise that although Badger is no longer with them physically, he lives on through his friends.</p>
<p><b><i>The Paper Dolls</i></b></p> <p>Julia Donaldson</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-</p>	<p>A string of paper dolls go on a fantastical adventure through the house and out into the garden but then a very real pair of scissors threatens. A lovely, illustrated book which helps children to understand loss and consider the importance of memories.</p>








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<p><b><i>Fred</i></b>          Posy Simmonds          Amazon ISBN 978-1783440290</p>	<p>Fred's owners, Sophie and Nick, think he is the laziest cat in the world, but who knows what goes on after dark? It's only after their beloved pet dies, that they discover he has been leading an exciting double life.</p>
<p><b><i>The Tenth Good Thing About Barney</i></b>          Judith Viorst          Amazon ISBN 978-0689712036</p>	<p>When Barney's cat died his mother suggested having a funeral and that Barney should think of 10 good things about Barney. But the small boy can only think of nine. Later, while talking with his father he discovers the tenth-- and begins to understand.</p>

## Emma's Story: Example of Good Practice in an East Renfrewshire Early Learning and Childcare Centre



The following illustrates the response of an Early Learning and Childcare Centre to the death of a preschool child's (Emma) baby brother. It highlights some of the stages and issues that may prove helpful in managing the impact of the death on your community or preschool setting.

Emma was excited to become a big sister. Sadly, however, hours after his birth baby Joseph was diagnosed with Edward's syndrome and he was not expected to survive. Emma was told her baby brother was very ill. The family were as honest as they could be with Emma and the rest of their older children.

### ***Immediately following the death***

-  The school was informed on the day after the death of Emma's baby brother. During the phone call to the nursery Emma's mum talked openly about baby's death and offered staff the opportunity to visit Emma at the family home as she wouldn't be returning to nursery until after the funeral.
-  The Head teacher informed Emma's key worker about the death of baby Joseph and offered her the opportunity to visit the family home. An arrangement was made to visit the next day.
-  The Head Teacher informed the rest of the staff in small groups.
-  Nursery children were not informed at this point. It was agreed by the Head teacher and Emma's parents that it was not appropriate for all the children to know about the death.
-  Staff were reminded of other children in the school who have been previously bereaved and may require additional support
-  Emma's keyworker and a senior Child Development Officer visited Emma at her home the next day and took with them photographs of the children in Emma's group and some paper, pencils and a jigsaw.
-  The same staff members attended the funeral.

### ***Medium Term - before Emma's return to nursery***

-  The Head teacher stayed in touch with the family to discuss how to plan Emma's return to nursery. They decided that staff would follow Emma's lead, listening and offering support when required. If the other children asked questions, staff would be sensitive and let the parents of these children know that Emma had been speaking about the death of her baby brother.
-  Staff members were encouraged to support Emma if she wished to talk about the death of her brother. Staff members were offered support in responding to Emma's expressions of grief

The Senior Management Team ensured all staff felt confident that they could sensitively support Emma and other children if they heard Emma talking about her baby brother.

The staff prepared the nursery for Emma's return with a variety of story books that cover bereavement, jigsaws that features families and babies, dolls house and puppets. Although Emma is an articulate child it was agreed with her parents that some expressive resources such as art or drama would be suitable if she didn't want or feel comfortable enough to talk about the death of Joseph.

### ***Medium term - when Emma returns to school***

The Head teacher and Emma's key worker welcomed Emma at the door as she arrived with her mum. Emma settled quickly and mum was able to leave.

Throughout the morning, staff monitored Emma from a distance not imposing on her space but were available to support her when needed.

On a few occasions Emma talked about Joseph to her peers and often draw pictures of her whole family and baby Joseph. Staff would engage in the conversation when required but mostly just observed.

Emma chose to share her grief with a small number of friends and staff spoke to these parents individually about the death of Emma's brother and how important it was for her to share with her friends. Most parents were in agreement with it and most already knew what had happened as the families were friends.

Emma remained settled at nursery and the nursery staff maintained close communication links with Emma's parents to ensure any issues could be discussed and resolved quickly.

### ***Longer term***

During transition to Primary School, information relating to Emma's bereavement was included in paper work and in professional dialogue with the Primary School staff.