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**When your partner dies:
supporting your children**
Information for surviving parents / carers



There can be nothing more painful for a child than the death of their mum or dad

It is natural as the surviving parent to want to protect your children in painful situations, possibly keeping from them what has actually happened, or trying to hide your own upset feelings. Children tell us that sometimes this protection is not what they want: it can leave them feeling left out and confused. As a parent, you can't help but communicate with your children; even very small children manage to pick up from your body language that something serious has happened. The very bits of adult conversation you would rather they didn't hear tend to be what they remember. They watch adults and will notice and be affected by your reactions even when they are too young to fully understand what might be happening. They know when something significant has happened, and they are capable of taking in and making sense of more than adults tend to realise.

As a parent, it is understandable that your main concern will be your children. Being the only parent to your children and supporting them can be a daunting prospect. How you manage your own grief will influence how the children cope with theirs. Remember that what they need more than anything is your love and care and being as good a parent as the circumstances will allow is OK. Try not to expect too much of yourself. Finding support for you is essential.



The courage it takes to talk to your children about death cannot be underestimated. This is a huge responsibility, which can feel overwhelming. What can help you when you have to make tough decisions is to concentrate on what feels right for you and your children. You know your children best. The most important and helpful thing for them is stability, time with you, a familiar routine and being reassured you love them and are there for them. Your confidence to help the children with their grief will grow with time. Your family will undoubtedly be changed by what has happened, but not necessarily damaged.



Children need information and explanations that are honest, simple and in language they understand. What they don't know, they will tend to make up. They need to be included and to be able to trust the adults around them.

- If you can, talk to your children as soon as possible after the death of their Mum or Dad
- When explaining the death of their parent to your children, have all the children together and physically close to you and possibly have another adult with you for support. Speak slowly and honestly, bearing in mind that their level of understanding may vary
- Explain truthfully what has happened in words they can understand and let them see how you feel. Children learn about feelings by watching the adults around them. It is not helpful for children to think they have to be brave
- Use real words like 'dead' and 'died' and avoid using other phrases that can be very confusing for children

- In explaining what death means, it is important that you tell children that when someone has died, their body doesn't work anymore. Bodies that are not working do not feel any pain. Being dead isn't like being asleep – when you are asleep your body still works really well. Children will understand this.
- If you are unsure about some aspect, be honest about what you don't know and say that when you do find out, you will tell the children
- Very often, children are concerned that somehow they caused their parent to die. They need to be reassured that it was nothing they did, said or thought that made this happen. Younger children often feel that their thoughts are very powerful, and that if they think something, they can make it happen
- You are likely to need to repeat information many times and answer lots of questions. As the surviving parent you are likely to be exhausted and struggling with your own grief, and being asked the same questions over and over again can be extremely hard - but this is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Children can only take in a little information at a time, especially when it is upsetting and becomes difficult to hear
- Do your best to let your children know what will happen next. Children need to feel secure and naturally worry about practicalities, such as who will put them to bed tonight, help them with their homework etc.
- It is helpful to be aware that children find it difficult to be different, and may worry about this
- Children's reactions will vary greatly from showing extreme distress, screaming and crying to looking blank as if nothing has happened, or even giggling nervously – all are normal

There is further guidance in Child Bereavement UK's Information Sheet: 'Explaining to young children that someone has died'.

Children may want to see the person who has died

It can be a good thing for children to be given the choice of seeing their parent who has died, as this can help them accept the reality of what has happened. Preparing your children for this important goodbye is vital. Have someone to support you to see your partner's body first, so that you are aware of what they look like and can describe to your child the room they are in, where they are, what they are dressed in etc.



Photo: Richard Shymansky

Children need to be given information:

- About where their dead parent's body is being looked after – the place and the professional responsible
- That adults can take them to see their parent if they want to
- About who would take them and be with them during the visit
- That adults will tell them what their parent will look like before they go in to see them

Rather than tell children what they can or should do, it is better if you can show them by example. If you touch your partner's hand, this will show the child that they can do this if they wish.

Even when a person's body is seriously damaged, it may be possible for the children to see part of the body they will recognise, for example a hand with familiar rings, a watch etc.

In visiting the chapel of rest, children might like to take something with them to leave with their parent – this may be a drawing they have done, a letter or a poem they have written that can be placed in the coffin.

There is further guidance in Child Bereavement UK's Information Sheet: 'Viewing a body with a child'.

Children tell us it helps when they are included in the funeral

- When planning the funeral or memorial service, try to involve children as much as possible and give them the opportunity to have something special to them included e.g. a poem or music. In circumstances where the funeral is a very large event, some families chose to do an additional smaller service just for the children
- Prepare children for what will happen, and who will be there
- Explain that some people may be upset or tearful, and that this is what often happens at a funeral
- Ask someone close to your child to join you and the children so they can support them at the funeral and be with the children if they get upset and decide they want to go out. This can also help if you are overwhelmed with your own grief and feel worried about being unable to support your child
- For young children take something to occupy them such as a favourite toy, crayons, books etc.



- Talk about the funeral afterwards – the people who were able to be there came because they cared about your mummy/daddy. This sharing can help the child identify the people who still care for them
- If your children choose not to attend the funeral, remember there are other options such as a private family farewell at a graveside, or doing something special to remember the person who has died

There is further guidance in Child Bereavement UK's Information Sheet: 'Explaining funerals, burial and cremation to young children'.

Children's understanding and reactions are likely to vary. Children - even young children - can and do grieve, but the way in which children understand and react will be influenced by:

- how close they were to the person who died
- what has actually happened
- the child's stage of development
- their emotional maturity
- their experiences in life so far
- your family's cultural and spiritual beliefs

It is important when talking with children about the death that we use language appropriate to their level of understanding. Although a child's age does not give an automatic level of understanding, the following offers some broad guidance as to how children understand death at different stages in their development. It is important to remember that adults, adolescents and children often regress to being younger when something as big as the death of a parent happens.

Children under 2 years old

- Long before they are able to talk, babies are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the disappearance of a significant person who responded to their needs on a daily basis
- Toddlers might show a basic understanding of death when they see a dead bird or insect in the garden but they do not usually understand the implications of this, such as the dead bird cannot feel anything or won't ever get up again



Children from 2 to 5 years old

- Tend to think very literally, therefore it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion
- Often struggle with abstract concepts like 'forever' and find it difficult to grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death

Children of primary school age

- Begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and final. They may be fascinated with the physical aspects of death or the rituals surrounding it
- May see death as a person who might 'come to get you' or 'catch you' if you are unlucky
- Begin to develop their imagination and 'magical thinking', which reinforces the belief that their thoughts or actions may have caused the death and can lead them to fill in the gaps in their knowledge
- Mostly have an awareness of death having a cause and being irreversible, but at younger ages do not necessarily see it as inevitable, particularly in relation to themselves
- As they get older, begin to have a more mature understanding of death, realising that it is final, permanent, universal and an unavoidable part of life
- Can become fearful as a result of their deepening realisation of the possibility of their own future death



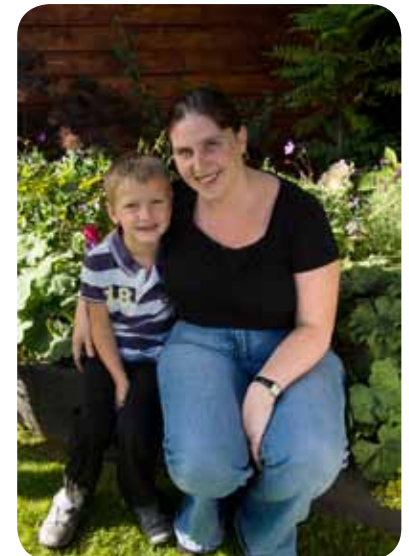
- May cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behaviour
- Are not helped by being expected to take on the responsibilities of their parent who has died, but need their offers of help to be appreciated
- Need to know that you still care about them, even if you are distracted by your own grief

As children grow they develop unevenly, so from time to time they seem to make leaps of understanding. This often happens at about 5/6 years old and at about 10, then again in early and late adolescence. When this happens children may need to talk about what happened and go over it again to fit it into their new view of the world.

Revisiting their grief in this way is something children do naturally and is not an indication that the way they were supported earlier in their grief was inadequate.

Stability, discipline and routine are important in helping children feel secure

- Sending children away to friends or more distant family members in order to protect them is not necessarily the best thing for them. Ideally, children need to stay in familiar surroundings with people who are part of their day-to-day life, and do the things they normally do as far as possible
- Their sense of security will be shaken by such a significant loss, and this can make children feel very anxious. They will need affection and often more cuddles than usual



Adolescents

- Grief may be compounded by the struggles of adolescence, finding it hard to ask for support while trying to show the world they are independent
- Often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others
- May talk at length about the death, but seldom to those closest to them in the family

- Children need lots of reassurance about who they have in their life to support them after a parent has died. Things that can seem quite trivial to a grieving adult, such as 'Who will make my lunch now?' or 'Who will take me to football?' may be a big concern for younger children
- Older children may be more aware of the other losses that might have to occur, and have worries such as 'Will we be able to stay in this house?' or 'Will I still be able to go to college/university?'
- Children can worry that you or other people important to them might become ill and die too and may suffer separation anxiety. When you are apart, letting them know when you will be home will help with this – children can become very concerned when their surviving parent is late
- They may wonder if it is their turn next, and fear that death is 'catching'. It is not unusual for children to develop symptoms similar to those of the parent who died. It is helpful to listen and take this seriously, and to offer reassurance and a loving response
- Try to maintain normal levels of discipline, not letting children do as they please because they are grieving. Keeping normal boundaries is a way to help children feel secure

There is further guidance in Child Bereavement UK's Information Sheet: 'How children and young people grieve'.

Children need help in expressing and understanding their feelings

- Children learn how to grieve by watching the adults around them. Don't be afraid to show your child how you feel – hiding your own feelings to protect your child can leave them confused about the feelings they have. Children may feel they should copy this behaviour too, and bottle up their emotions



- As adults, we instinctively want to protect children, but children are also very good at protecting the adults around them and as a result may at times choose to hide their feelings for fear of upsetting you
- Younger children have a short concentration span and are unable to tolerate intense emotions for long, so they may switch abruptly from crying to playing. The temptation is to become over-anxious about them when they show emotion, and not to 'rock the boat' when they seem OK, but both are normal aspects of the way children respond to grief
- Sometimes, children will 'act out' elements of the story of their parent's death, and this can be disturbing to the adults around them. Try to remember that this is one way in which children can begin to make sense of what has happened
- Explain to the child that they will have periods of feeling happy where they may temporarily forget the death of their parent and that this is OK
- Children often don't have our adult words to describe how they feel. Normal grief may show itself in behaviour such as naughtiness, anger, sleep disturbance, clinging and reverting to being more babyish, or being more grown up, extremely good and wanting to please. This behaviour is only a cause for concern when it lasts for a long time and affects the child's ability to engage with life
- Anger is a common reaction to loss. Children can feel very angry with the parent who has died and left them or with you for surviving. If the death was sudden, there will have been no opportunity to say goodbye. They may have bitter regrets about something they said or wish they had said. The child may also be adjusting reluctantly to the new reality that as a lone parent you cannot give the same attention as before



- If their parent was ill for a long time before the death, children may feel relieved that the parent has died. They may also have resented how life changed when their parent was ill and feel guilty about these understandable emotions
- It is not unusual for children of any age to feel responsible in some way for the death, however irrational this may seem. They will need overt reassurance that they are not to blame
- Simple books written about loss and death, and young people's websites with information on grief and loss, can help their understanding of what has happened and the emotions they are experiencing

There is further guidance in Child Bereavement UK's Information Sheet: 'What helps grieving children and young people'.

It is important to talk to your child's teachers at school so that all staff are aware of what has happened and can therefore offer appropriate support. Identify one member of staff as a key contact.

Ideally children need to be involved in what their school friends are told, and be given the opportunity to say what would help them when they return to school. They may need time out and to have someone they know they can go to if they are feeling upset. This needs to be thought about and discussed with teachers.



Most children do not want to be seen as different when at school and prefer to be treated the same as everyone else. However, this should not prevent staff offering discreet care and support. Often, school offers stability and routine when it feels like life at home has been turned upside-down and everything is different. Good communication between school and home is what to aim for to ensure everyone is aware of how your child is managing.

Reassure your child's teacher that given the choice, most parentally bereaved children do not want to be excluded from Mother's Day or Father's Day activities.

You might like to let your child's school know that Child Bereavement UK produces an **Information Pack for Schools** and has a teachers' section on its website at www.childbereavementuk.org. The charity can also offer support to your child's school.

Friends are very important to children, and especially to teenagers who are perhaps more likely to prefer to talk to their friends than to family members.

There is further guidance in Child Bereavement UK's Information Sheet: 'Understanding grieving teenagers'.

Remember above all that children are children and need to have fun and to do things they enjoy – playing in itself is a therapy. Encourage your child to see their friends and help them to tell their friends what has happened. Explain how you share your feelings, who you talk to and how it helps.

Some friends may like suggestions about ways they can be supportive, otherwise their embarrassment at not knowing what to do or say can feel excluding to a child who is grieving. Be mindful that children can be cruel in the playground, and sadly some bereaved children get bullied.

Children may also at times feel jealous of their friends who still have their mum or dad.

Memories make the difference.

Children are helped greatly when they are supported in finding ways to remember things they and others did with their parent before they died.

Some things that children have found helpful are:

- Looking together with you at photographs of their parent who has died
- Sharing family stories or memories of events involving the child and their parent
- Choosing and being able to keep an item of clothing worn by their parent
- Playing music their parent loved
- Making a scrap book about their parent who has died
- A collage of pictures e.g. Daddy as the husband, Daddy as the father, Daddy as the friend
- Putting together a memory box for each child in the family containing tangible reminders of the person who has died. This should be their personal collection of reminders of who that person was and what they meant to them. It also gives a child some control back in their lives as they choose what does and what doesn't go into their memory box.



Photo: Richard Shymansky

Looking after yourself is essential in supporting your child

Managing life and your own grief at the same time as being a surviving parent to your child/children is exhausting. Try not to expect too much of yourself – you can only manage a day at a time.

What do you find helps you? Try to find a way of making some time for yourself to recharge your batteries. This may feel 'selfish', but it will ultimately help you be better placed to support your child.

Accept any offers of help. Keep a list of jobs that need doing to help you answer when people ask, "What can I do for you?"

Some bereaved parents and children have found it valuable to meet others in similar circumstances (e.g. The Way Foundation – www.wayfoundation.org.uk) helping them feel less alone and different.

Where the circumstances surrounding the death are particularly traumatic, you may need more specialist bereavement guidance for yourself, and your children might need further help. Child Bereavement UK's **Support & Information line** on **0800 02 888 40** will be able to help you find appropriate support.

Contact us

Child Bereavement UK

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Email: support@childbereavementuk.org

www.childbereavementuk.org

If you are bereaved, caring for, or concerned about a bereaved child, and are looking for information or guidance, our bereavement support team is here to take your call and respond to emails 9am-5pm Monday-Friday.

We provide:

- A confidential listening service
- Guidance and information to families and professionals on a wide range of topics and issues
- Details about the direct support Child Bereavement UK can offer
- Signposting to other organisations which can offer further support specific to your needs

Our website contains a wealth of information for families and professionals which is free to download, including the Information Sheets mentioned in this booklet. There are also suggestions of books suitable to read with bereaved children. The website includes a 'Family Forum' - a welcoming environment in which to share experiences and feelings, where you can make contact with other bereaved families.