Education & Children's Services
Educational Psychology Service

Fife COUNCIL

Information Leaflet for Parents and Carers on Bereavement and Loss

How might my child respond to a death?

Children and young people experience the same feelings as adults after a bereavement or loss. They have a similar need for support, but they may not be able to express their feelings in words. Children often show their feelings in how they behave rather than what they say. You might see that your child:

- jumps in and out of sadness e.g. they could be distressed one minute and then happily playing the next
- shows anger and/or behaviour that you might expect of a younger child
- uses pretend play to try and make sense of what has happened
- has difficulties with sleep, such a bad dreams and fear of the dark
- is clingier than usual and does not want to be left alone, which is linked to fears for their own safety or the safety of family and friends
- becomes focussed on the death and shows fears about dying
- has difficulty in concentrating (e.g. in school)
- becomes very aware of danger, including sensitivity to loud noises
- is not as interested in food

How can I talk to my child about the death of a loved one?

Children grieve, even at a very young age. You might feel that you are protecting your children by not talking to them about a serious illness or death; however this can make them feel confused and excluded. If you are worried about saying the wrong thing the following tips might help.

Explain what has happened

Try to talk to your child honestly and explain what has happened in a way that they can understand. It is clearer to say someone has died rather than the person has 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away'. This may be confusing for the child, or might make them frightened to go to sleep or worry that you might go away and not come back.

Encourage questions

Children will often ask the same questions over and over, which can be distressing, but it's part of their need for reassurance and can help them process information. When they ask a question, you could start by asking: "What do you think?" Then you can build your answer on their understanding of what's happened.

Listen to how your child is feeling

Allow your child to have the chance to express their feelings and thoughts about the death. Try to avoid telling the child not to worry or be sad. Explain that everybody responds to death in different ways and that it's OK to feel sad, angry, confused, empty, guilty, anxious. Your child might need more time to absorb what has

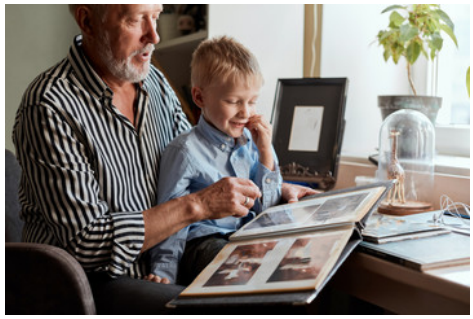
Reassure

Give your child plenty of reassurance. For example you might need to explain that their loved one did not want to leave them. Let them know they're still loved and that there are people there to care for them. Or you might need to reassure them that they are not to blame for what has happened. Let them know that being naughty doesn't make someone die, nor do wishes and thoughts. Everyone says and does things that later they wish they hadn't.

Should my child go to the funeral?

Include your child in decisions about how they would like to say goodbye. Explain what would happen at the funeral and let them know that funerals can be a good way to say goodbye.

How can I help my child remember?



It might help to make a memory box including some favourite photographs, objects that remind your child of their loved one or a tissue with their perfume or aftershave sprayed on it. Your child might like to write them a letter, poem or do a drawing. It can be helpful to think of some happy memories and favourite stories to write down and put in the box.

Be honest about your feelings

Children easily pick up on tension, distress or anxiety in adults and without an explanation this can leave them confused. It can be helpful to share feelings and explain that it is natural to be upset and to cry (even for adults). If you are feeling completely overwhelmed, be kind to yourself, take some time and space to process your strong emotions before speaking to your child.

Should I keep routines the same?

Yes, keeping routines and behaviour boundaries the same can help your child feel secure. Continue to support them to do the things that they enjoy – it is important to still have fun while you are grieving. Keeping the connections you have with people in the community is also very important because grieving can make both adults and children feel isolated.

Should I get support for myself?

As a parent, it can feel scary to be vulnerable in front of others, but exploring your feelings with those who you trust is an important part of the recovery process. Sharing memories and your sense of loss can strengthen old and create new friendships.

Returning to school after someone dies

There are no set policies that say how much time off school or college bereaved children and teenagers can take. However, be aware that keeping normal routines is important and having too much time off could make it harder for them to manage. The following suggestions might be helpful to think about when communicating with school.

- Get in touch with the school as soon as you can so that they are aware of the bereavement. They may help you identify a member of staff who can be available if your child needs to talk to someone.
- Let school staff know how you have explained the death to your child. Create a joint script so that both you and school staff are giving the same messages when your child asks questions.
- Ask your child what they'd like you to tell their school so they feel involved and have a say. This is especially important with older children.
- If your child is finding it hard to go to school, consider giving them an object to remember you (e.g. a handkerchief sprayed with your aftershave/perfume, or, if they are older, make a plan to stay in contact at lunchtime). This can help them feel reassured that you are close and safe.

The organisations below can provide further information and advice:

Winston's Wish is information, advice and guidance on supporting bereaved children and young people during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

www.winstonswish.org - Freephone National Helpline 08088 020 021

Childhood Bereavement UK brings together guidance and information to help support you at this difficult time.

www.childbereavementuk.org - Helpline 0800 02 888 40

Bereaved people may have to deal with increased trauma, and may be cut off from some of their usual support network. Those who are already struggling with bereavement, or whose relatives or friends die through other causes will also be affected.

www.cruise.org/.uk - Helpline 0808 808 1677

Further information on supporting Emotional Wellbeing in Fife can be found on the GIRFEC website:
https://girfec.fife.scot/emotional-health-and-mental-wellbeing/

Alternatively, you can contact the Educational Psychology Service for information and advice:
www.fife.gov.uk/educationalpsychology