


Education Resources
Psychological Service

A photograph of several hands of different skin tones cupping a dark red heart. The background is a wooden plank wall. The image has a soft, slightly desaturated color palette.


Supporting Children and Young People with loss and change

Supporting Children and Young People with loss and change

Feelings associated with loss and change can be extremely difficult to process. When children and young people experience significant changes in their everyday lives, either through experiencing the death of someone close to them, changes within their family circumstances or change and loss of friendships and relationships out with their family, it can be difficult to know how best to support them.

The outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19) has highlighted that for some children and young people, coping with changes to routines, missing seeing friends and family, and physical distancing guidance has led to feelings of loss. Being isolated, away from their everyday routines and other supportive adults may have also made it harder to process these feelings, as well as perhaps not being able to say goodbye to loved ones in the way we would have liked to.

It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel right now. However, by trying to understand children and young people's unique responses to loss and change we can try to help support them through unpredictable and challenging times together.



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Understanding how children and young people respond to loss and change

We understand that children and young people all have unique responses to loss and change.

Some common responses for children can include:

- Increased feelings of anxiety or worry
- Feeling angry or guilty that they did something to cause what happened
- Increased physical complaints e.g. headaches or stomach complaints
- Feeling more tired or frustrated
- Regressing to younger behaviour or trying to take on a more adult role within the home
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping more
- Increased question asking, particularly when you least expect it
- Showing little emotion and continuing as if 'nothing happened'

The way children respond to loss and change has often be described as 'puddle jumping.' This means that children and young people can seem to jump between feelings and reactions quickly, e.g. feeling upset one minute and then wanting to play or interacting happily the next. This does not mean that they are not upset by what has happened but are processing their emotions in their own way.

In order to fully understand a child or young person's response, it is useful to reflect on what the child or young person's understanding of the situation is. The following section provides information regarding children's understanding of change and loss according to their age and stage. It is important to note that this is simply a guide and to remember that every child or young person's development and stage of understanding is unique.

Early years

Understanding of loss and change

- Can be very sensitive to any feelings of separation, such as being separated from adults they see every day, including nursery staff and other carers
- Not yet able to understand that death is final
- Do not yet understand 'abstract' phrases
- Can respond with 'Magical Thinking', which may lead them to believe that they caused the illness or death, or that they can bring the person back to life
- Will communicate their reaction to loss or change often through behaviour, such as reverting back to younger behaviour or changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Will often communicate through their play, for example role playing

What can help?

- Opportunities for lots of time together, reading, drawing, and playing together can give lovely opportunities to express any emotions and worries
- Maintain a sense of routine and predictability as much as possible, even though it may be completely different to your usual daily routines
- Try and keep connected to loved ones where possible, by helping them to speak on the phone or even drawing them a picture or a card when they miss them
- Offer lots of cuddles and reassurance (this is important for all ages!)


Lower primary

Understanding of loss and change

- Beginning to understand that death is irreversible and final
- Increasing interest in death and physical reactions, such as the process of dying
- May show physical symptoms to unexpressed emotions or say that they 'don't know why' they feel a certain way
- May become easily frustrated or regress to much young behaviour as a way of coping with change to routine

What can help?

- Short and repeated opportunities to express their feelings, let them know that this is ok to do
- Giving age appropriate clear answers to their questions. When this is not possible, simply listening and acknowledging their frustration will let them know that you are there for them
- By modelling and expressing your own feelings alongside, talking together about ways that you can begin to cope and feel better together can be helpful

A photograph of a family of four sitting on a dark leather sofa. A man is on the left, looking towards the center. A young girl is in the middle, smiling. A woman is on the right, looking towards the center. They appear to be in a living room with a window in the background.

Talking together
about ways that you
can begin to cope and
feel better together
can be helpful

Upper primary and early adolescence

Understanding of loss and change

- Children and young people are now beginning to develop the ability to reflect on the 'abstract' notion of death and are more aware of its finality which can raise anxiety
- They may become more anxious about their own health and the health of others
- They may also then communicate their feelings through behaviours, such as regression, or experience physical symptoms

What can help?

- Opportunities to talk and get age appropriate answers to their questions
- Reassurance and consistency from adults around to them
- Maintaining a level of routine and predictability in their day
- Asking them how best you can support them can be helpful, simply being close by them or knowing that you are there when they want to talk can be helpful

Late adolescence and young adults

Understanding of loss and change


- Will have an understanding of the concept of death but may not yet have the coping skills of an adult
- May experience a range of emotions but not know how to express or manage them
- May communicate their reaction to loss through behaviours, which can appear like they are being impulsive or reactive

What can help?

- Create opportunities to talk, often while doing something together
- Acknowledge the range of emotions they are going through
- Model labelling and expressing your own emotions
- Ask how you can help them best

Supporting children with Additional Support Needs

Loss and change is hard for anyone to understand. For children and young people who experience additional challenges in their understanding and communication it can sometimes be difficult for adults to identify and know how best to respond. Like all other children and young people children with additional support needs will experience an impact of any loss or change and are likely to express this through their behaviour, experience physical symptoms or emotional changes. You can help children with additional support needs by reinforcing a sense of security and safety, maintaining familiar routines and structures, and giving them opportunities to experience or participate in activities through which they can express themselves.

A photograph showing a young boy in a wheelchair on the left, smiling and looking towards a woman on the right. The woman has curly hair and is also smiling, looking back at the boy. They appear to be in a bright, indoor setting. The image has a soft, warm color palette.

Loss and change is hard for anyone to understand

Key points for supporting children and young people experiencing loss or change

Be clear – try to avoid the use of euphemisms when discussing loss or change, although this can feel difficult, particularly with little ones. When someone dies phrases such as “he’s gone on a trip”, “she has passed away” or “is in a better place” can be confusing and sometimes even scary for children.

Honesty – by being open and honest in an age appropriate way you can continue to build trust in your relationship. It also allows children to develop and build effective coping strategies from the modelling of adults around them.

Reassurance – when children are not given adequate information, they will often make up their own stories to fill the gaps. These are often much worse than the truth! Sometimes asking them what they know or understand already about what has happened can help guide your answers.

Allow them to ask questions – when children are faced with any loss or change in their life they often begin to ask more questions in order to make sense of what is going on for them, these questions can often feel difficult to answer. Remember, it is ok to say that you do not know all the answers.

Talk about feelings – model that all feelings are ok and that there are no right or wrong ways to feel. By talking and helping them to put a name to their emotions children will be able to develop their own ways of coping.

Maintain routines – when the world feels chaotic and unsafe for a child it is even more essential that a sense of routine is maintained. This will work to support children feel safe, soothed, secure and more able to express how they are feeling.

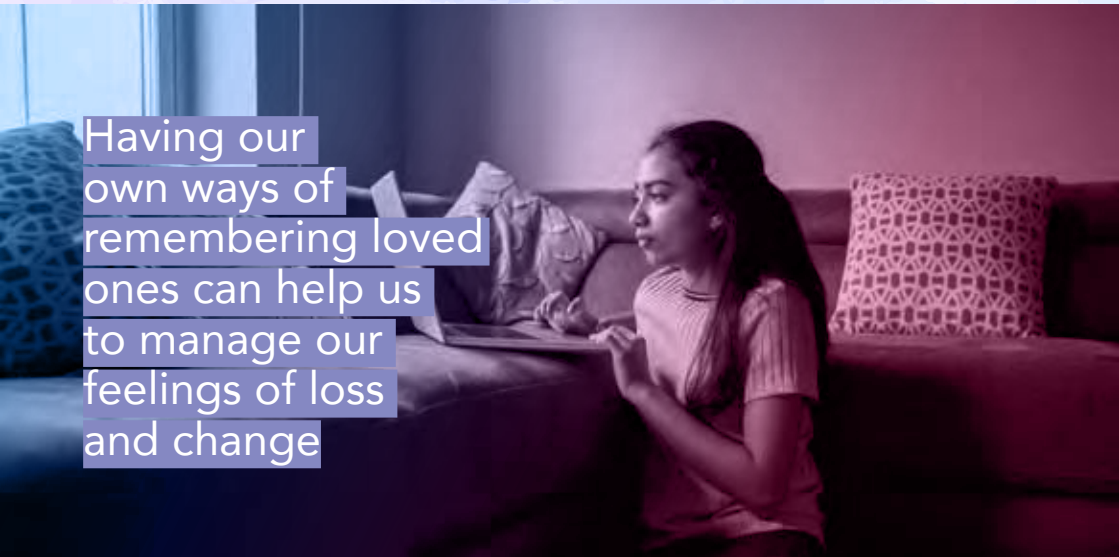
Breaks – reassure children, and teenagers that it is ok not to feel sad all of the time. In order to help them process loss and change it is important for them to take time out and remember that it is ok not to feel sad all of the time.

Communication – it is important to recognise that although talking is the main way in which adults communicate when experiencing difficulties, it is often not for children. Opportunities to play, draw, read stories and make things together can also be a way to share and make sense of how we are feeling. Using books or pictures can sometimes be helpful to explore feelings of loss together.

Reaching out – coping with loss or change in a time where we may feel cut off from our friends, family and school can be overwhelming. Remember there are still people out there to help, connect online with family and friends where possible, talk on the phone or speak with a professional.

Family rituals – having our own ways of remembering loved ones can help us to manage our feelings of loss and change. Making a memory box with some of their favourite things, making their favourite meal, remembering your favourite memory or singing their favourite song together can be a way to support children following loss or change.

Good enough – we may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information telling you how best to support your child that is available online during the COVID 19 pandemic. Remember there is no such thing as the perfect parent, teacher or support for a child. By simply being there for your child, listening and offering reassurance you are good enough.



Having our own ways of remembering loved ones can help us to manage our feelings of loss and change

Useful websites and further resources for supporting children and young people

Child Bereavement UK

www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children

Young Scot

<https://young.scot/campaigns/national/coronavirus>

Cruse bereavement

www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief

Beyond Words – free guide for parents and carers

<https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/downloads-shop/when-someone-dies-from-coronavirus>

Winston's Wish – suggested booklist

www.winstonswish.org/suggested-reading-list

Give Us A Break – further booklist and website signposting

www.giveusabreak.org.uk

Compassionate Friends

www.tcf.org.uk

Richmonds Hope – offers support to children and young people affected by bereavement, leaflets available online

www.richmondshope.org.uk

Grief encounter - grief guide for teenagers

www.griefencounter.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/12583-Teenagers-Guide.pdf

Childhood Bereavement Network

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Smart Grief - interactive website for children and young people to work through the feelings associated with bereavement and loss

www.smartgriefguide.co.uk

Hope Again - youth website of Cruse and has videos and online advice for young people

www.hopeagain.org.uk

Additional websites and resources for supporting children with additional support needs

Information and tips on breaking bad news to people with learning disabilities or autism

www.breakingbadnews.org

PAMIS bereavement and loss resource pack for those supporting people with profound and multiple learning disabilities

<http://pamis.org.uk/resources/bereavement-and-loss>

National Autistic Society

www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx

Examples of Social Stories and downloadable Resources

<https://elunanetwork.org/resources/supporting-grieving-children-with-autism-spectrum-disorder>

Some advice for supporting young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder from the Child Bereavement Network:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7EmW29Avx4

Some advice on supporting young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder from Dr Tony Attwood.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VJ_8TdYBd8

If you would like more information please contact Psychological Service on **01698 455800** or at **enquiries@slcpsych.org.uk**

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