



ENFIELD  
THRIVES TOGETHER

Barnet, Enfield and Haringey  
Mental Health NHS Trust



*A University Teaching Trust*



**SUPPORTING CHILDREN & YOUNG  
PEOPLE WITH DEATH AND BEREAVEMENT  
DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS**

27TH APRIL 2020

## **This is a unique situation**

Death and dying are always very hard to cope with. The coronavirus pandemic means that we are facing many additional challenges:

- Unpredictability and suddenness: your loved one may have died without warning.
- Distance: Your children may have been unable to spend time with or say goodbye to their dying relative. In their grief, children and young people won't be able to see their extended family and friends who would be able to comfort them. They will not have their usual routines and companionship of school and other groups to support them.
- At the same time as processing their grief, they may be managing worries about their own health and the health of the other adults in their lives.
- Families are living in confined spaces which can increase tension and arguments, especially when trying to deal with grief.
- Lack of 'specialness': Many will know someone affected by a death due to coronavirus. The death of a child's important person will not receive as much attention as before this crisis.
- Constant reminders: everyone is talking about the virus, so it's hard for your child to avoid.
- Absence of rituals: children will have less chance to say goodbye in a formal way, due to heavy restrictions on funerals.

*Adapted from Winstons Wish*

At such a worrying and sad time, we know that supporting children in a few key ways can make a big difference for their mental wellbeing throughout their lives.

## Why it's good to talk

You might be thinking about whether or what to tell your child about the illness or death of someone who is close to them. Many decades of research, and the stories of adults who experienced bereavement as children, tell us that it is better to tell children the truth than to keep secrets or not mention things. We also know that it is better to show and talk about feelings- even the really painful ones- than to try to hide them.

We know that...

1. If we help children to talk about their feelings, we offer them a safe context in which to live their lives.
2. If we help children to talk, they will learn how to reflect on their feelings rather than 'behave them'.
3. It will develop their brains as well as their minds.
4. They will be far more able to manage stress well throughout their lives.
5. They will develop a far more sophisticated language for their emotions.
6. They will be able to 'suffer well' by seeking out support and comfort from an understanding adult.
7. It helps them to develop the ability to take in comfort.
8. It develops their insight and emotional awareness.
9. They will be far less likely to carry emotional baggage into adulthood.
10. It has major benefits for their self-esteem.

*Information from Margot Sunderland's book Conversations that Matter*

## How to talk to children about death and dying

- Tell the truth. Even very sad truths are better than uncertainty and confusion. If children do not know the facts, they will make something up, and this is often more painful.
- Use simple direct language. Use the words 'died', 'dead' or 'dying'. Euphemisms such as 'lost', 'passed away', 'gone away' and 'gone to sleep' are confusing and frustrating for children.
- Explain unfamiliar words; for example: "When someone dies, their body stops working and they are no longer able to do the things they could when they were alive, such as move or talk or hug or play."
- Let the child know that it wasn't their fault, and they haven't done anything wrong.
- Check their understanding, and be ready to repeat the information more than once.
- Ask them if they have any questions.
- Answer their questions honestly. If you don't know the answer, tell them you will find out and come back to them.
- Let them know that everyone has big feelings about the death, and it's ok for them to have all kinds of feelings too. Tell them that they can always tell you about how they are feeling.
- Do not put responsibility for others' feelings or care onto the child. Don't ask them to be 'brave for mummy' or to look after their siblings.
- After the initial telling, keep the child informed. Let them know about any funeral arrangements, or planned ways of saying goodbye.
- Continue to talk about the person who has died. Use their name, and share your everyday memories of them.
- Allow the child to talk about the person as much (or as little) as they want to.
- It's ok for children to see that you are sad and grieving. Explain to your child why you are sad or crying, so that they don't worry that they are the cause.

- Recognise that every death, and every reaction to death, is unique. A child's reaction will depend on their relationship with the person who died, the timing of the loss in that child's development, their developmental understanding of death, the nature of the death, their support network, and other factors.
- If you are seeing the child for the first time since their bereavement, directly acknowledge this: "I was so sorry to hear that your dad died. How are you feeling?"

*Adapted from Winstons Wish*

Children can only use the words that they know. They may label their feelings with words like 'bored' and 'hate,' and need you to help them find different words. You can offer them options e.g. "When parents die, children can feel lots of different things. They can feel sad, left, angry, confused, and a painful feeling of missing them. Maybe you feel some of these things, or maybe it's something different for you."

*Information from Margot Sunderland's book Conversations that Matter*

## **Beyond words: children's behaviour following bereavement**

Children who have been bereaved may not seem their 'normal' selves. They may:

- Find it hard to concentrate.
- Be more tired and irritable.
- Seem more sensitive to things which wouldn't have upset them before
- Be wrapped up in their own feelings, making it harder to take others' feelings into account.
- Behave in very angry ways, seeming to 'take their feelings out' on others.

*Adapted from Winston's Wish*

You can support your child by:

Preparing yourself for unpredictability: your child may seem unaffected at some points of the day, and really struggle at other times. Try to accept your child's state in the moment: your child being happy doesn't mean they didn't love the person who has died. Your child expressing angry feelings doesn't mean they are trying to make your life even harder.

Keeping to your child's daily routine as much as you can, with waking and bedtime, and three meals as anchors in your day. Children and young people tell us that they usually want as much normality as possible.

## What do children and young people understand?

Try to think about death from your child's developmental stage. Remember that this won't always be the same as their chronological age:

**Babies from birth to 6 months** do not understand death, but are aware that someone close to them is missing. They experience separation and loss, and can become anxious and fretful. They also pick up on feelings of grief in their primary caregivers.

**Infants from 6 months to 2 years** can picture their primary caregiver if they are not present. They may protest their absence by crying. They may seem withdrawn. They may look for their caregiver in places they used to be.

**Children aged 2 to 5 years** do not understand the finality of death, so they may not react as expected to the news e.g. they might carry on playing. Like older children, they may think that their thoughts, words or actions are responsible for their loved one's death. They may feel frightened and frustrated. Their behaviour might regress, and they might show separation anxiety.

**Children aged 5 to 10 years** are beginning to understand that death is final. This can mean that they worry more about the possible deaths of other people who they are close to. They are beginning to understand everyone else's sadness, and may want to protect the adults from sadness, including their own. They may find it hard to enjoy playing, and have difficulties with concentration. They will dip in and out of grief.

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**Children aged 10-12** years have more understanding of death. They may feel more responsible for what has happened. They might feel angry, responsible, conflicted, sad, and frightened. They might feel low in mood or develop headaches, stomach aches or problems sleeping.

**Young people aged 13+ years** probably understand death well, and wonder about the bigger implications, like the purpose of life, as well as the practical implications like the family's financial survival and who will look after them and their siblings. They may experience the same stages of bereavement as adults, but their reactions are likely to be particularly intense. They may revert to more childlike behaviours, and their grief may look like hostility and resentment. They may withdraw from others, find it hard to sleep, and feel very low. They may try to take on an adult role towards their family, resulting in 'growing up too quickly'.

*Information adapted from West Lothian Critical Incident Framework for Schools (2014) and Cruse.org.uk's information on children and teenagers' understanding of death.*



## Helping children to say goodbye

Several bereavement charities have shared good ideas for helping children to say goodbye when they cannot attend a funeral or wake:

- Arrange a virtual meet up with family members and friends where you can share stories and memories together. You could have a theme or wear the person's favourite colour.
- Encourage your child to do a drawing or write a poem or letter which they might want to go in the person's coffin or have read out at the service.
- Ask people to light a candle (at their home) in memory of the person who has died. You could organise it so everyone lights their candle on an agreed day and time to make it feel more special.
- Set up an online memorial page and encourage people to add their memories and photos.
- Create a memory box which your child could decorate and personalize.
- Play the person's favourite music and take time to remember them.
- Arrange a celebration or memorial service for later in the year (perhaps on a significant date) so everyone has the opportunity to say goodbye. Involve your child in planning the event.
- Consider an online fundraising page to support a charity of that person's choice.
- When the current social distancing guidelines have been relaxed you could arrange to visit the grave.

*Suggestions from Nelson's Journey and Grief Encounter*

## Helping children to remember

This activity from the children's bereavement charity Winston's Wish, is a helpful way to support children to speak honestly about their feelings and memories about the person:

Find a jagged, rocky pebble. You or your child could describe it. It is rough, and has sharp bits. Ask your child to hold it tightly and squeeze it in the palm of their hands – how does it feel? Not nice, it may even hurt a little. Use this pebble to explain that there may be some difficult memories or feelings for your child right now. They may be struggling with the way in which the person died, or they may be feeling guilty that the last words they shared were unkind ones.

Next, find a normal pebble. Again, describe it with your child, using words like "normal", "smooth" "ordinary". State that this stone signifies the ordinary, everyday memories they may have of the person who died; the fact that they ate prawn cocktail crisps or liked dancing.

Finally, look together at a shiny, precious gemstone. The characteristics of this stone are that it is sparkling and precious, it looks great. Use this to explain that we will have some great memories of the person who died. It may be a best holiday, or a special trip to a football match, or an evening spent watching DVD's curled up together on the sofa.

All three stones are important and the feelings and memories described by them are all true.

The stones can all be held together in one hand, and the memories can all be held in our minds together.

## Getting more help

Grief Encounter

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/>

Support for bereaved children and their families in North London.

Winston's Wish

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Support for children and young people after the death of a parent or sibling.

CRUSE

<https://www.cruse.org.uk>

Support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies.

Child Bereavement UK

<https://childbereavementuk.org/>

Support for families when a child dies.

KOOTH

<https://kooth.com/>

Online mentalhealth service for young people aged 11 to 19 years.

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This resource has been developed by Enfield Thrives Together, an emerging virtual team of existing school-facing services to provide a focus on supporting the health and wellbeing of our school communities.