

# *Bereavement, loss, and grief*

Death is difficult for everyone involved, whether you are an adult or a child, death is shocking and confusing.

Telling your child that someone has died is probably the hardest thing you will ever have to do. Often as adults, we want to protect our children from death so by not telling them we think we are protecting them however in reality, children are very aware and can notice when something is wrong.

One of the first questions is 'how much should I tell them?' It is normal to worry about making things worse by saying too much or the wrong thing but remember the worst has already happened.

Here are some useful points from Winston's Wish;

- **Use clear language when telling your child someone has died.** It is better to use clear and direct language with children. Use the words 'died' and 'dead' rather than 'passed away' or 'lost' when telling them. These terms can lead to confusion, especially in younger children who may wonder if they can go and find a person who is now 'lost'. It is better to be open, honest, and direct when a loved one has died. In the absence of clear information, children tend to 'fill in the gaps' to try and make sense of what is happening. This can mean that children imagine all sorts of things about a death, which are often worse than reality.
- **Build up information like a jigsaw puzzle when explaining** you do not need to give all the information in one go. When telling a child someone has died, it's best not to give them all the information in one go, it would be better to give them smaller chunks to build up a picture just like a jigsaw. For example, a very young child they start to build puzzles with just a few blocks and for them "Mummy has died" and "it's really sad" might be enough to begin with. As the child becomes older, they may need more information to make sense of the puzzle for example you may need to explain, "Mummy heart has stopped working which means her body is broken."
- **Let them ask questions about what has happened** if children are older it's important to ask them how much information they would like to receive, for example "would you like to know what happened at the hospital?" Let your child know they can ask more questions in the future too as this is important that they know they can rely on adults around them to give them the truth at a confusing time. Even if you do not know the answers immediately, reassure them you will try to find out for them.

- **Ways to explain to a child that someone has died, some suggested words:**
  - *“We know that all living things will die someday. Flowers, animals, trees, butterflies, and people all die eventually...”*
  - *“... However, the great majority of people will die when they are very old.”*
  - *“Occasionally, someone will die before they are old because, for example, of an accident or serious illness.”*
  - *“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.”*
  - *“Sadly, [name] has died. Everyone wishes they had not died and had lived for many more years. However, their body was not able to keep working and so they died. Their heart stopped beating, their lungs stopped breathing and their brain stopped thinking, and so they died.”*
  - *“We are very healthy and we’re going to do all we can to keep that way, because I want to be around to [play with my great grandchildren/travel to Mars/celebrate the year 2100].”*
- **How might children and young people react to death** Although they will feel it just as deeply, children will experience and react to grief in different ways to adults this means they could react quite differently to how we expect them to react. Initial reactions could vary greatly from considerable distress to finding it hard to speak or they may even not react at all.

Young children to jump in and out of grief just like jumping in and out of a puddle – leaping from feeling very upset and distressed one moment to wanting to know what’s for tea or whether they can play football, for example. The reason for this is, children need a break from powerful emotions that accompany their grief and so are able to jump away from them for a while so that they are not too overwhelmed.

Whilst this can be very difficult for adults to understand, it is very normal and it does not mean that they don’t care. It can take time for them to process what has happened and they may need help to express their emotions. There can also be feelings of guilt especially if a sibling has died, children will need reassurance that the death was not their fault.

- **How to help children and young people explore their emotions,** Children will look to the adults around them to make sense of grief and how we react. Sometimes as adults, we worry about letting our children see us upset, as we are worried we will make things worse. Grief is very complicated both adults and children experience a range of emotions. It is not going to damage your child if they see you cry, however

more extreme reactions may be frightening to them. It is ok to explore feelings with children and give them permission to explore their own too. For example, you may say, "Mummy is crying because Daddy died and I miss him."

Speaking aloud can help children understand and be aware of what is happening in their world. Just like adults try to protect children from their grief, children do the same and may be worried about showing how they are really feeling. With encouragement, it is possible for children to explore how they are feeling instead of keeping it locked away.

There will be days when it is more difficult than others, It is important to look after yourself and do what you feel able to. However speaking honestly to children can help them feel included and valued at a time when life is difficult. You may feel like you can grieve together but it's also important to realise this may take time as you are grieving at a different rate to begin with.

### **Where to get support**

Many organisations can help with grief, below are some that may be useful:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/>

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

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

<https://rainbowtrust.org.uk/latest-news/how-do-we-help-children-open-up-to-grief?gclid=Cj0KCQiAqdP9BRDVARIsAGSZ8AlhqvwcxYJz5gjWSHGBSgfEiD98J1J7 GeD PA7aB C2QZw9JsDXtt0aAiFFEALw wcB>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people>

<https://www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/how-do-i-support-a-bereaved-child>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-grief-and-loss/>

<https://www.teachearlyyears.com/a-unique-child/view/supporting-bereaved-children>

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/find-help-near-you.aspx>

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

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/supporting-grieving-child/grief-affect-child>

[https://ellenor.org/wellbeing-services?gclid=Cj0KCQiAqdP9BRDVARIsAGSZ8AmGCvS-wZPj-Pyt7JtWuN52gm0ArUBI255Y4wE7mgTaolnq7zVOAJ0aAuJVEALw\\_wcB](https://ellenor.org/wellbeing-services?gclid=Cj0KCQiAqdP9BRDVARIsAGSZ8AmGCvS-wZPj-Pyt7JtWuN52gm0ArUBI255Y4wE7mgTaolnq7zVOAJ0aAuJVEALw_wcB)

### **Activities to do at home which may help with grief**

- **Journaling** – For older children you can use journaling as a way to get emotions out, encourage your child to write down what, and how they are thinking/feeling. The grammar and spelling is not important with this activity as the most important task is to write freely. To help with starting them off you could use these sentence starters; *I am..., I feel..., I hope..., I wish...*  
Children can share or keep it to themselves, it's important to validate their feelings no matter what they are.
- **Breathing techniques** – Use some different breathing techniques to help with anger, frustration, stress, and anxiety.
- **Cathartic crying** – Give children the permission to cry, some children find it difficult to cry so maybe listening to sad music, talk about memories. Maybe watch sad films or read sad books as crying is also a good release of emotions especially if children struggle with this.
- **Worry Monster** – For younger children you can use a worry monster for them to write or draw any worries they are feeling. They can place them into the worry monster and then you can discuss any worries they may have together. If the child is too young to write, you can scribe for them. There are many ways you can either make or buy a worry monster. Places like Amazon sell worry monsters or you can make one out of a cardboard box/wool etc... (Please see photos below)



- **Say what was unsaid** – Sometimes when someone dies there are often words, which are left unsaid, to help with this you could encourage your child to either make a video or write a letter to the person. Discuss with your child how the person would have responded to the letter/video. Do not be scared of talking about the person who has died.



- **Memory jar/box** – A memory jar/box is a wonderful way to keep the person alive and thought about. All you need is a jar or box; you can get your child to decorate the jar/box how they would like. Then ask your child what their favourite memories are of that person. Write down as many memories you can on slips of paper and then place them into the jar/box. You can also add photographs or objects that may have a special connection



with the person who has passed. Whenever your child is feeling upset or missing the person, get them to read some of their favourite memories and think of the happy times they have shared.

