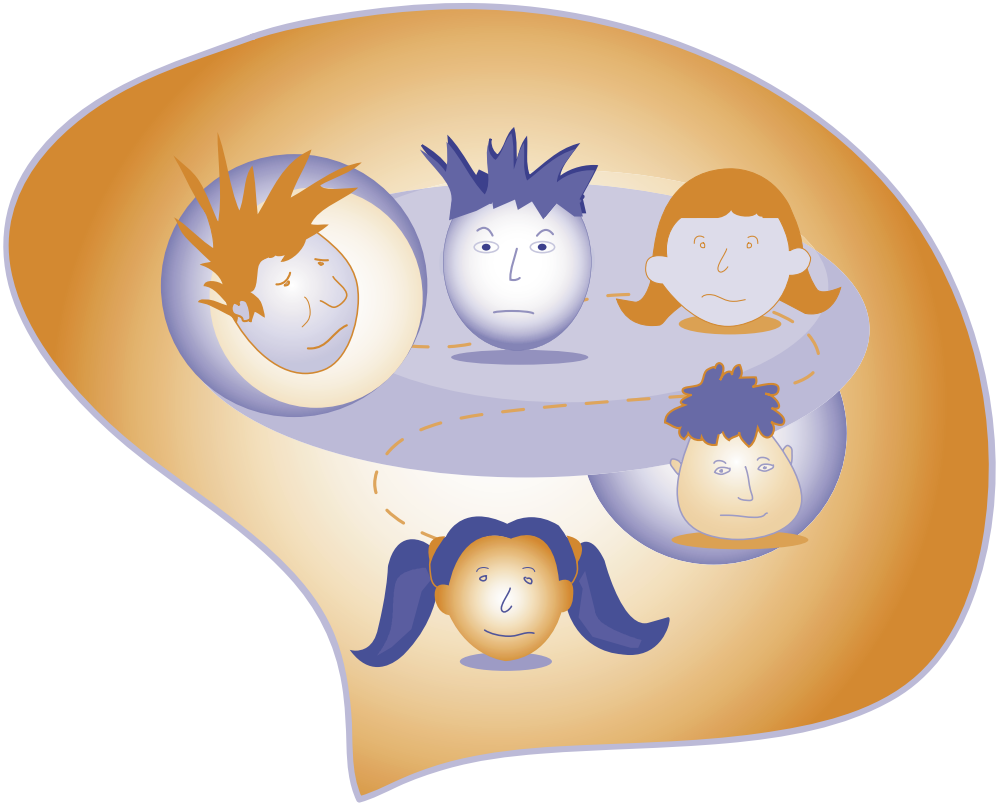


Walsall
Bereavement
Support
Service



Reg. Charity No. 1152724



supporting bereaved children

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The Forgotten Mourners

Susan C Smith

Helping Children Cope with Grief

Rosemary Wells

Loss, Change & Grief. An Educational Perspective

Erica Brown



Children's Responses to Death

New experiences can create new feelings that are intense and confusing. Not understanding a situation adds worry, fear and insecurity to the feelings felt by children and young people when a person in their life dies.

The unexpected has happened and their world is no longer the safe place that it once was. It has become unpredictable and uncertain.

Children can sense when there is something wrong, when things have changed. Restoring their routine and trying to create a sense of normality is important for them to feel safe.

As adults we naturally want to protect children and young people from the pain felt after a death. The pain that we are experiencing, as adults, often seems unbearable for us, let alone a child.

We think that we are protecting them by NOT telling them the events that lead up to and following death. By not allowing them to go to funerals or to be involved in any way can lead to the child imagining events.

As their understanding and emotional intellect develops, their response to the loss may change and those closest to the child will notice these changes. They might start to ask questions about the person who died, about death and about their own security and mortality.



In the long term children and young people have fewer difficulties if they are told the truth and given choices. Experience shows that children focus on the positive aspects of the person who has died.

Don't think that they can't take the truth. They listen to as much or as little as they can bear. They may need repeated information in order for them to understand, but also they may need you to give them more information than you are comfortable with in order for them to feel safe.

Children cope better with the truth than being fobbed off. Try talking about the death with them. If this is too hard for you, find someone who can talk with them.

They need to see adults grieve and who can share their feelings in order for them to learn how to grieve.

- Tell them what has happened in an appropriate way for their age
- Give them honest explanations. Truthful and consistent explanations, not long detailed information.



Questions

When a death occurs children need information. If they do not get this it can be very frightening and confusing for them. They are left wondering what is happening? And why? The questions fall into the following categories:

- Factual information
- Questions about feelings
- Looking for a meaning / reason why
- Practical concerns
- Spiritual and Religious questions.

“ **Factual questions** are usually about what has happened and what happens to the body.

‘Where do they go when they die?’

‘What is cremation?’

‘Do dead people eat and drink?’

‘Can a dead person still see me?’

‘When will they come home?’ ”

“ **Questions about feelings** are a child’s way of checking out the range of emotional experiences they have and witness. They learn how to mourn from modelling those around them and the way they see others’ grieve.

‘Why is Mummy crying?’

‘Will I feel happy again?’

‘Has mummy stopped loving me?’

‘My friends tease me about being dead. I don’t understand why?’ ”



“ **Looking for a meaning or a reason why?** Is part of how a child develops their understanding of death.

‘Why do people have to die?’
‘Did my brother die because I gave him the sweets?’
‘Will you die if you get poorly?’
‘If I become ill will I die?’
‘Does someone die because they have been naughty?’
‘Why couldn’t the doctor make him better?’
‘Why hasn’t Mummy brought the baby home with her? Was it because I was naughty?’ ”

“ **Practical concerns** Everyday things become an issue for the child.

‘Who will take care of me?’
‘Who will take me to school?’
‘Who will buy my birthday present?’
‘What will happen to me when you die?’
‘Why have I got to go and stay at aunties?’ ”

“ **Spiritual and Religious questions**

‘Why couldn’t God make nanny better?’
‘Where has she gone?’
‘Where is heaven? Is it at the cemetery?’
‘Will I see them when I die?’
‘I want to go and live with nanny in heaven’ ”

Left without explanation, the adult language / expressions may confuse and become a worry to a child.



Avoid using common phrases like:

- Gone to sleep
- Lost
- Gone away
- Passed away

A child has expectations of these words from their experience of life.

‘Goes away’ If someone ‘goes away’ to a child this could mean: On holiday, to visit a relation, to work. A return is usually expected.

‘Going to sleep’ They understand that people wake up from sleep, think of the meaning it has for them if a person is not seen again after sleep.

- Granny dies and a child is told she has gone to sleep. A child might question - Why hasn’t she woken? When will she wake up? Will I go to sleep and not wake up? Will the same thing happen to mum or dad?

‘Lost’ A child hears someone say ‘I’m sorry to hear that you’ve lost Granny’. A child’s imagination could conjure up all kinds of thoughts from this type of condolence. ‘When will we find Granny? The police found Ben (the dog) and brought him back. Will they bring Granny back?’

The language that adults’ use when talking about death often gives a child a different message. The real meaning of the word can instil expectation and even fear into their minds.

Try to use the words: Dead and died.



Expressing their Grief

Children need to know that their feelings are normal. Give them opportunities to express their grief in their own way and in their own time. When someone dies a child does not always have the understanding or language to express his or her feelings. They may appear not to be grieving. They can act out their feelings, and depending on the type of behaviour, they are sometimes thought to be naughty. Some children and young people suppress feelings, sometimes resulting in an apparent indifference or lack of feeling.

It can be difficult to differentiate between grieving and what we accept as normal childhood behaviour. Children will be adjusting to the changes and this can be very frightening and unsettling for them as the world they knew is no longer as safe as was originally perceived.

Their behaviour might change They may become:

- Withdrawn and quiet
- Aggressive
- Attention seeking
- Naughty
- Disruptive / rude.



They may develop regressed behaviour like:

- Bed wetting
- Being clingy, wanting to sleep in your bed
- Wanting more cuddles than is usual
- Talking in a tone of voice younger than their years.

These responses are their way of making sense of what is happening, often trying to re-establish a sense of security; to make their world feel safe again when a family has been thrown into the turmoil of grief.

Older children often display changes in personality:

- Mood swings
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Depression
- Low self-esteem.

School performance and behaviour might change:

- Loss of confidence
- Poor concentration
- Over / under achieving
- Disruptive/ rude behaviour
- Refusal to go to school and truanting
- Bullying.

In an attempt to numb the pain young people might develop self-destructive behaviour by endangering themselves, by getting involved in petty crime, drugs, alcohol, self-harm. Reaction to the fear of death may cause some young people to take unnecessary chances with their own life. By confronting death they may try to overcome the fear and take control of their own mortality.

Children grieve in cycles as their emotional intellect develops, their understanding of grief may change and they may show signs of grieving, many years after the death of someone, as new issues and life changes occur.



Do not make assumptions that their way of grieving will be the same as yours. Without the support of others children may suppress or act-out their grief inappropriately, but some children manage their grief very well and never have adverse long-term reactions.

What Children Need

- Age appropriate information
- Clear, honest explanations which might need repeating
- Adults who can show their feelings
- Help to express themselves
- Opportunities to ask questions
- Simple answers
- To know that feeling angry and upset is OK
- That feeling happy and having fun is OK
- To feel safe and secure
- A familiar routine to give a sense of normality
- Regular reassurance that the death was not their fault
- Reassurance that they will not always feel this way
- When possible to be included in decisions
- Choices and options.

How to Help a Child

- Don't deny or hide your own feelings. Children learn to grieve by modelling adults
- Talk about the person who has died. This shows that the persons life was important and had meaning
- Let them know that death and grief is as much a part of life as birth
- Listen to them
- Children need space and time to grieve, as adults do



Support in School

The school community may be the one place where the child can escape the grief surrounding them. Routine and school atmosphere can help to restore a sense of security when part of their life might be in chaos, normalizing their day and allowing them to be who they are and have some fun.

Following some routine and familiarity with the child helps to reduce long-term disruption in the classroom and the school.

It is important that the child / parents / carer's permission is sought before sharing any information about the death

Creating a Daily Schedule

This may help to support the child and the teacher. Alongside having to deliver the class lessons and sometimes coping with their own feelings of loss and sadness the responsibility often felt by teachers to support grieving child(ren) can be a huge load to carry. A schedule could incorporate coping strategies for the child and this could help to reduce the pressure on the teacher.

A schedule/ diary could include:

- Set times when the teacher can be available to the child
- To check in with teacher before lessons start and at the end of the day
 - This gives an opportunity to explore any difficulties the child might be having
- During lessons - when a bereaved child gets upset have another appointed member of staff who the child can go to. If the teacher needs to have time out with the child have someone to take over the lesson



- For older children, give them permission to leave the classroom without having to ask or to explain why in front of their classmates
- Provide a quiet private place where the child can go when they are upset
- Allow the child to bring to school a small personal item that they find comforting or a photograph to keep in their desk or in a secure place
- Providing a reality check
 - Bereaved children are often preoccupied with their own health and that of their family. Allow them time to telephone their parent / carer during the day or visit the school nurse can reassure them that they and their family are ok
- If possible give the child additional support so they can talk with someone about their feelings
- If children agree, introduce other children who have been bereaved to the child and if necessary, adjust any school rules to accommodate contact. This can help to reduce the isolation and stigma often felt when someone dies.



Schools Responses to a Death

In the event of a death these are some suggestions of things to do and consider.

- Inform staff of what has happened. Have a meeting; give accurate information, to help dispel myths and rumours.
- Send a letter of condolence to the family.
- Decide who will inform the children / pupils. Will it be the class teacher? Will it be the Head teacher? Will this be in the classrooms or assembly? Will the whole school be told?
- Be aware of other bereaved children in the school who might require additional support
- Decide who will support the children & staff
- How will this support be offered?
- A letter to parents informing them of what has happened, in order to prepare them should their child ask questions or be disturbed / upset. Give additional information of helpful telephone numbers
- Where possible consult with the family
- Decide if, or how the school should be represented at the funeral
- How will the school mark the day? (if at all)



Helping Bereaved Children in School

- For staff to be aware that bullying may occur - other children might behave this way to the bereaved child
 - When children experience death indirectly it heightens their awareness of the reality of it and can trigger all kinds of emotional responses. The reality that this could have been them, the fear of that possibility, or it may bring to the surface their own unresolved grief. Children will some times act out these responses by bullying
- Acknowledge the death, try not to avoid it
- Teacher to check with the child at the beginning and end of each day. Don't put the onus on the child to find the teacher.
- If they become upset give them the space to be sad and cry. Don't tell them to stop or to get on with their work
- Allow them to leave the room if necessary
- Have an appointed person who the child can go to at any time, particularly if distressed
- Teachers to be aware of when the death occurred and be sensitive to special days and times of the year e.g. Christmas, Father's day, Mother's day, Birthdays
- Create a calendar of these dates that will follow the child through school and to new teachers / schools so they are aware of these dates and why they might be difficult



- o Note - Children / young people should be asked if they are ok with this, especially with the transition from one school to another
- It may be a long time before emotional reactions are shown. Don't expect their grieving to be over in a few weeks or months. A child's grief can appear and reappear at any time, even years later. They grieve cyclically; as their emotional intellect develops, events in life can trigger their grief and create new issues for them
- Give them the opportunity to share their experience **if they want to**
- The teacher could talk to the special friends/ class of the pupil and discuss ways of being supportive
- Show understanding by being patient and listening to their needs
- Avoid using phrases like 'You should be over it by now'
- Make allowances for the circumstances and find ways to manage difficulties e.g. examinations.



Some Behaviour Changes in Grieving Children

- Poor attention
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty in following directions.
- Falling asleep (due to not being able to sleep at night)
- Over achieving
- Withdrawn not wanting to talk or play
- Over talkative
- Disorganised
- Restless in staying seated
- Sudden and unexpected outbursts of tears.
- Anger /temper tantrums
- Bullying
- Naughty / rude
- Becoming the class clown
- Regressed behaviour, talking in a voice younger than their years, wetting themself
- Show reckless physical action.

They may

- Want more personal attention
- Not want to eat
- Have an obsession with morbid thoughts and questions about death
- Want more contact with their parent / carer. Consult them about what the school will do or can offer.



Ways to Help the Children Through the Grieving

- A memory garden-plant bulbs and flowers
- Plant a tree
- Release a balloon - Letting off a helium filled balloon with a message attached, naming the person who has died or 'I remember when'
- Prepare something to leave in the 'special place' - flowers, a laminated poem, a toy
- Light a candle and share special memories with each other
- Hold a small ceremony with specially chosen music, poems and tributes
- Bring a picnic of the dead person's favourite food to share
- Memory book
- Put up a plaque
- Have an award in memory of the person who died - this could be for a special interest they had or something you remember them for. E.g. bravery, caring or fun times
- At special times of the year e.g. Father's Day or Christmas, still allow a child to make their cards if they want.



Other Suggestions of Ways to Support Pupils

- Have a problem 'blues' post box where children can post a note or letter saying they have a problem, issue or difficulty. This gives them a safe opportunity to raise the issue and possibly ask for help. Let the children know who will have access to the box and the level of confidentiality you can offer
- Display useful web addresses that children can safely access on their own. E.g. Winston's Wish
- Respect the child and their families right to privacy and do not discuss inappropriately what you have been told or the grief responses of the child
- Encourage staff to talk with their class about how they are feeling and how others might be feeling
- Lessons around loss - allowing a child to talk about their feelings and experiences of death and loss
- If a member of staff wants additional support look for ways in which this can be provided.

Children's Understanding of Death and Loss

0-3 years of age

- Views death as a loss, separation or abandonment
- Less disturbed
- Responds to parent's grief.

3-6 years of age

- Sees death as temporary, reversible
- Magical thinking. Believes that their thoughts can make things happen. Death is often equated with sleep
- They may have nightmares, confusion, regressive behaviour or seem unaffected.



7-8 years of age

- Begins to see death as permanent
- Perceives death as due to old age or Road Traffic Collision (RTC) etc
- Sees death as happening to self
- Interest in morbid detail
- May respond as if nothing has happened
- More socially aware of how to behave.

9-12 years of age

- Understands death as permanent, final, irreversible
- Death applies to everyone including them self
- More understanding of the long-term consequences
- Children may start to experience a full range of emotions.

12-14 years of age

- Experience a full range of adult responses
- Fear for the future.

Factors Affecting Grief

- Adults' response to the death
- Circumstances of death
- The relationship with the deceased
- Personality of child
- Learning abilities
- Previous experience.



Children Bereaved by Suicide

There are complications and difficulties to overcome when a death is more public with the involvement of:

- Police
- Court / coroners investigation
- Media coverage of the death.

This can complicate and delay grieving.

Investigations are bewildering for adults. Children are often given minimal information until the cause of death is confirmed. This may take months before the coroner passes a verdict. Adults may have a good idea as to the causal intention of the deceased but children are often left waiting before they are told anything more than that the person has died.

Stories start; family, friends and neighbours all have their own ideas about the death. The papers report a story and friends and neighbours read and talk about what they have found out. Children may overhear conversations, their imaginations are creative and they may invent various scenarios based on this. The inability to understand the situation they find themselves in influences what adults say to children. It might be less painful for **them** to believe that the death was caused by anything other than suicide.

It is important for children to be told when they ask:

- The truth about the death
- The method used to complete suicide
- That they are not responsible.



To avoid telling the children what has happened can be damaging. It leaves the child feeling isolated and confused. Others seem to know more; they hear their peers talking or they are told stories by them that '*my Mum said..*' or '*it was in the papers*'.

They know that things aren't right and they sense when there is more to know and that information is being kept from them. This can delay their grieving.

Give reassurance that nothing they said, did, or thought caused the person to do this.

Complications

- Family thoughts and beliefs about suicide
- Finding the body
- Where the suicide takes place & the place death occurs
- Other adults / surviving parents grieving ability and response
- Blame
- Relationship breakdowns
- Coroner withholding evidence
- Bullying.

Difficulties for Children

- Fears that they might have they own suicidal thoughts / tendencies
- Fear that another person may attempt or complete suicide
- There has been no time to say 'good bye'
- Viewing the body is not always possible because of the method of suicide
- Forced changes to life with no time to prepare
- Sometimes feeling of relief
- Stigma
- Curriculum criteria.



Difficulties for Others

Explanations as to why a person made a decision to die are extremely difficult to give. Sometimes they will check out information with others so it is always best to keep the information simple and consistent.

- Children ask awkward questions that adults might find difficult to answer because of their own grief or beliefs
- The child might share openly to others that the person killed themselves
- Surviving parents and relations feel anger for the deceased putting the child /ren in the situation
- Fears of making the child feel worse.

Note: Many of these complications and difficulties apply to those bereaved by murder, road traffic collision and accidental death.

We hope you have found the information in this booklet useful and informative.



Useful Web Sites & E-mail Addresses

Children's Walsall Bereavement Service (01922) 645035
Counselling and support
mobile: 07910 721045
children@wbss.org.uk
www.wbss.org.uk

The Child Psychotherapy Trust
www.thechildpsychotherapytrust.org.uk
info@childpsychotherapytrust.org.uk
070 3798 1515

Child Bereavement UK
Information
www.childbereavementuk.org
Helpline 0800 0288840

Winston's Wish
The Clara Burgess Centre,
Bayshill Road
Cheltenham
Gloucestershire
GL50 3AW
*Interactive web site for children
and young people*
www.winstonswish.org.uk
(01242) 515157

Understanding Childhood
www.understandingchildhood.net
02072 818479

Papyrus
Teenage Suicide Prevention
www.papyrus.org.uk
Call 0800 068 4141
Text 07860 039967



Helping children cope with loss...

- *Individual Counselling*
- *Family Support*
- *Children Support Groups*
- *Parent/Carer Support*
- *Books and resources*
- *Information / Advice*
- *Professional Supervision*

Walsall
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