



Advice and information for parents

# Bereavement

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## Children and bereavement

When someone in the family or a close friend dies, it affects everyone and it is vital to support children during such a difficult time. A child or young person can also feel bereaved and experience grief when someone close to them goes away permanently or is absent for a long period of time. The death of a much-loved pet can be every bit as devastating to a child.

## How children respond to death

A child's reactions depend on several factors:

- How close the person was to the child and how involved the person was in their life, or what they meant to them
- Whether the death was sudden, or expected
- The circumstances of the death
- How the rest of the family deal with the death; religion and culture will have an important influence
- What practical support is available to the family

## Siblings

Children from the same family may react very differently to loss. Where one sibling might be immediately and obviously grief-stricken, another may not show any signs of stress or grief for some time afterwards and find it difficult to come to terms with their loss.

## How children of different ages understand death

**Infants** can feel loss that affects the way they are looked after and their daily routines; they are sensitive to unhappy feelings around them. They can become anxious, fretful and needy.

**Pre-schoolers** usually see death as temporary and reversible, influenced in this belief by cartoon characters that 'die' and 'come to life again'.

**From age five**, children understand basic facts such as: death happens to all living things. Death has a cause. Death means permanent separation. Dead people do not see, hear, speak or feel and they do not need to eat and drink.

**Young children** believe that they cause what happens around them and therefore are responsible for the death e.g. by being naughty.

**Teenagers** understand death more like adults; they are aware of others' feelings but often find it difficult to put their feelings into words. They may not show their feelings in case they upset others.

### **Trauma and mental health**

Children and young people respond in varying ways to trauma, such as bereavement. Nearly all will experience and express some level of distress. This can lead to changes in behaviour as they try to cope with their feelings. These changes might include: separation anxiety (especially in young children), sleep disturbance, nightmares, deep sadness, loneliness, developing new fears, losing interest in normal activities, reduced concentration and achievement at school, anger, irritability and physical complaints. The death of a parent, close family member, a friend, teacher or much-loved pet can have devastating and long lasting implications. It is difficult for family members to be brave for others in their family, while they are also grieving. Professional help can be so important in supporting families.

### **Expected bereavement**

When a family member knows they are going to die, pre-bereavement counselling can give the child extra support with thinking and talking about their feelings and sharing their worries.

Sarah Smith, bereavement counsellor at London's Trinity Hospice, says: "Hospices offer pre-bereavement care to help patients and their family in the run-up to the end of life. We especially encourage this for children because children's stress levels are at their highest before bereavement because of fear and the unknown."

### **Sudden or unexpected death**

When a death is sudden or unexpected, children can show strong shock symptoms in emotional and physical ways. They may refuse to believe it, scream, shake, stop talking, moving, eating or drinking; they may have tummy aches, headaches, pains, dizziness, nightmares or long sleeps. Extreme reactions are normal and the most important thing that family and friends can do is to provide support and safety.

In the first hours, days and weeks, a suddenly bereaved young person in shock needs those around them to:

- Love, hold and reassure them
- Make sure they are safe from harm e.g. crossing roads without concentrating
- Make sure they eat and drink, keep clean and warm, keep some kind of bedtime routine
- Make sure their responsibilities are covered, e.g. feeding pets
- Tell everyone who needs to know, e.g. school
- Help them to talk and try to make sense of what has happened
- Include them in what's happening

### **Bereavement support**

There are bereavement charities that offer helplines, email support, and online communities and message boards for children. ([www.nhs.uk/livewell/bereavement/Pages/bereavement.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/bereavement/Pages/bereavement.aspx))

## What can help? What to do.

These are things that can really make a difference:

1. Be open and honest with your child. Explain, age-appropriately, why the person died.
2. Answer all the difficult questions about death and loss even though it is likely to be painful and uncomfortable. It's okay to not have all of the answers, feel comfortable in saying you don't know
3. Listen to your child's experience of the death. Reassure them if they blame themselves for what has happened – this is common.
4. Understand that children worry about being alone and abandoned and help them to talk and express themselves e.g. through play.
5. Don't be afraid to express your own emotions. By showing grief you are encouraging your child to express theirs too. Spend as much time as possible helping your child to show their feelings openly – their sadness, anger and anxiety will come out over time and at unexpected times.
6. Reassure young people that it is okay to cry and become upset. Children can worry about upsetting their parents even more if they show their emotions
7. Sometimes they 'forget' and believe the person is still alive. This is normal in the first few weeks but can be a problem if it persists
8. Use clear language when talking about death. We can all find it difficult to say the words and have a tendency to use softer expressions such as "gone away or gone to sleep". These expressions can be confusing for young children as they may believe loved ones will come back or become fearful of falling asleep themselves
9. Do not feel like you have to divulge lots of information about the bereavement at once, as this can be overwhelming for both you and your child. Be guided by your child's questions as this will inform you about what they are curious or uncertain of.
10. Be prepared for your child to continuously ask the same questions. Going over and over it can help them to process their loss and gain reassurance
11. Prepare children for the changes they may face. The death of a loved one can have a huge impact on the family's routine and structure. Ease any worries such as who will pick them up from school
12. Help a child to say goodbye. Include them in family gatherings and activities, such as the funeral or celebration of life events. Spend time deciding on the best way to support and prepare a child for these. Do not force a child to attend anything if they feel frightened – find alternatives such as lighting a candle, letting off balloons, saying a prayer or poem, writing a letter, making a memory box, planting a shrub, looking through photographs, visiting the grave or another special place.
13. Help to make a memory box of photos, films, drawings, some clothing, favourite perfume/aftershave and other significant items. This can be a huge source of comfort. Macmillan Cancer Support offers help with this: [www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/advanced-cancer/relationships/making-a-memory-box.html](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/advanced-cancer/relationships/making-a-memory-box.html)
14. Acknowledge upcoming anniversaries and share ideas with your child about how you can commemorate these

15. Take care of yourself. Allow yourself time and space to grieve for your own loss. The more you look after yourself, the better able you will be to support your child
16. Give young people choice. There is no “best” or “right” time to access support for young people who experience bereavement. You can make your child aware of the different support options that they can access and ask them what they would like to engage with. It is also important to reassure them that they can access support in their own time
17. Finding ways to help children deal with feelings and emotions now is likely to lessen emotional repercussions later in life.
18. Look out for warning signs that a child may need more help. These can include:
  - A long period of sadness or depression
  - Reduced interest in daily activities
  - Withdrawing from friends
  - Inability to sleep, loss of appetite, fear of being alone
  - A sharp drop in school performance
  - Acting like a much younger child for a long time
  - Denial about the death
  - Imitating the dead person all the time
  - Talking repeatedly about wanting to join the dead person
19. Seek professional advice if you are worried and need support in helping the child through the mourning process. This might be the GP who might refer to CAMHS or bereavement counselling.
20. Don't feel that you are on your own! – There are lots of organisations that can provide support to families who have experienced a bereavement.

The charity Grief Encounter ([www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)) has detailed the main needs of bereaved children:

- Comfort through their pain
- Help in finding ways to manage their grief
- Opportunities to tell their story
- Help in filling some of the empty spaces
- Facts
- Feeling cared for and understood
- Structure and routines
- Ways to make sense of confusions with adults
- Acknowledgement that death is omnipresent
- Help in finding a new kind of normal

# Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations. Please let us know about any anomalies you find.

## Grief Encounter

[www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)

Provides support to children and families who have been bereaved via phone, online chat and email. You can also take part in group activities with likeminded families at their Fundays, Grief Groups and Remembrance Days.

Phone open Monday-Friday 9am-9pm:  
0808 802 0111

Online chat: [www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk) (click on the 'grief talk' banner)

Email: [griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk](mailto:griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk)

## Winston's Wish

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Provides support to bereaved children, families and any adults supporting a young person through bereavement.

Their helpline and email service offer listening and advice for anyone supporting a bereaved child. Open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm.

Phone: 08088 020 021

Email: [ask@winstonswish.org](mailto:ask@winstonswish.org)

Their online chat service provides support directly to young people. Open Fridays 10am-1pm: [www.winstonswish.org/online-chat](http://www.winstonswish.org/online-chat)

They also offer face-to-face support in some areas of the country. You can find information at [www.winstonswish.org/face-to-face-support](http://www.winstonswish.org/face-to-face-support)

## Cruse Bereavement Care

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Provides support to anyone affected by bereavement – both young people and adults.

Their helpline is open Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when they're open until 8pm.

National helpline: 0808 808 1677

Cruse Scotland helpline: 0845 600 2227

Cruse also offer local services in most UK regions, which you can find at [www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/local-services](http://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/local-services)

To find face-to-face support available in Scotland go to [www.crusescotland.org.uk](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk)

## Child Bereavement UK

[www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)

Supports families and children when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying.

Open Monday-Friday 9am-5pm.

Helpline: 0800 0288 840

Email: [support@childbereavementuk.org](mailto:support@childbereavementuk.org)

They also offer face-to-face support in some areas of the country. You can find information at [www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/child-bereavement-uk-support-services](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/child-bereavement-uk-support-services)

## Hope Again

[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

Cruse Bereavement Care's website for young people with information, vlogs, podcasts, videos and personal stories.

To access support, young people can email [hopeagain@cruse.org.uk](mailto:hopeagain@cruse.org.uk)

## Childhood Bereavement Network

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Provides information for adults supporting bereaved children, including parents, carers and professionals. Their website also lists local services offering bereavement support to children.

For enquiries, phone 020 7843 6309 or email [cbn@ncb.org.uk](mailto:cbn@ncb.org.uk) (please note this is not a helpline service).

## We are Macmillan Cancer Support

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Support for anyone diagnosed with cancer or supporting someone diagnosed with cancer.

Open 7 days a week, 8am-8pm.

Helpline: 0808 808 00 00

Email (response time 2 days):

[www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/ask-macmillan-form.html](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/ask-macmillan-form.html)

Advice about preparing a child for loss and making a memory box

[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/advanced-cancer/relationships](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/advanced-cancer/relationships)

## Marie Curie

[www.mariecurie.org.uk](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk)

Care, guidance and support for people living with any terminal illness, and for their families.

Open Monday-Friday 8am-6pm and Saturdays 11am-5pm.

Helpline: 0800 090 2309

Online chat:

[www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support-line/using-online-chat](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support-line/using-online-chat)

## Child Death Helpline

[www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk](http://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk)

For anyone affected by the death of a child of any age.

Open Monday-Friday 10am-1pm, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 1-4pm, and every evening 7-10pm.

Helpline (calling from landline): 0800 282 986

Helpline (calling from mobile): 0808 800 6019

Email: [contact@childdeathhelpline.org](mailto:contact@childdeathhelpline.org)

## The Compassionate Friends

[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)

Support for bereaved parents and their families after a child dies. Calls are answered by parents who have suffered the death of a child.

Open every day of the year 10am-4pm and 7-10pm.

Helpline: 0345 123 2304

Email: [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk)

Northern Ireland (open every day 10am-4pm and 7-9.30pm): 0288 77 88 016

## Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

[www.uksobs.org](http://www.uksobs.org)

Support for people over the age of 18 bereaved by suicide.

Open Monday-Friday 9am-9pm.

Helpline: 0300 111 5065

Email: [email.support@uksobs.org](mailto:email.support@uksobs.org)

Local support group finder

[www.uksobs.org/we-can-help/local-support-groups/find](http://www.uksobs.org/we-can-help/local-support-groups/find)

## Childline

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

24/7 helpline: 0800 1111

Chat 1:1 with an online counsellor:

[www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat](http://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat)

To email: Sign up on the website, so you can send your message without needing to use your name or email address, at

[www.childline.org.uk/registration](http://www.childline.org.uk/registration)

## Barnardos

Information booklet helping adults explain death to children and young people

[www.barnardos.org.uk/child\\_bereavement\\_booklet\\_explaining\\_death.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/child_bereavement_booklet_explaining_death.pdf)

## Dying Matters

Resources supporting you to have conversations about death

[www.dyingmatters.org/page/resources-talking-about-death-and-dying](http://www.dyingmatters.org/page/resources-talking-about-death-and-dying)

## Sue Ryder

Advice around talking to children about loss and bereavement

[www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/telling-a-child](http://www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/telling-a-child)

## Youth Access

[www.youthaccess.org.uk](http://www.youthaccess.org.uk)

Offers information about advice and counselling services for young people aged 12-25.

## Youth Wellbeing Directory

[www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing)

Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

## Finding a private counsellor or therapist

If this is an affordable option for you, you can find accredited private child and adolescent therapists and counsellors living locally to you by searching the following directories.

Counselling directory: [www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)

BACP: [www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists](http://www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists)

UKCP: [www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist)

## YoungMinds Crisis Messenger

Provides free, 24/7 text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis.

Text YM to 85258

Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.