

DEATH:

HELPING
CHILDREN
UNDERSTAND



Barnardos

No child gets left behind

INTRODUCTION

This booklet aims to give some explanation of how children at various stages of development understand death. It will help those who are faced with the difficult task of talking to children about death and dying.

Death is an inevitable part of life and grief is a universal human process. We cannot shield children from the reality of death or the pain of loss. What we can do is help them to understand and grieve and so equip them to be better able to cope.

TELLING YOUR CHILD

Breaking the news of the death of a parent, sibling, close relative or friend to children can be very difficult. Whether the death is sudden or anticipated, parents and carers want to protect children and themselves from greater distress. However, children need to be told about death and helped to understand the implications of their loss.

- ▶▶ Use simple and practical terms. Try to link your explanation to what the child already understands about loss, such as the loss of a pet, change of school or death of a relative.
- ▶▶ Don't be afraid to use words like dead and dying. Even though they seem harsh, they are less likely to lead to misunderstandings later.
- ▶▶ Try to make it clear that when people die this means that their bodies no longer work, their heart has stopped beating. They no longer need to eat and sleep and they no longer feel any pain.
- ▶▶ Be careful about using phrases like 'she has gone to sleep', 'gone away' or 'we lost grandad'. Children may get confused by these terms and our everyday use of them.
- ▶▶ In the absence of information, children may make up their own stories, which can sometimes be more frightening than the actual facts.
- ▶▶ When children hear about a loss, particularly if it is somebody very close to them, ensure that they are not alone.
- ▶▶ Be prepared to have to repeat the story several times and answer repeated questions. This is your child's way of making sense of what has happened.
- ▶▶ Children need to know it is okay for them to express their feelings in their own way. Children may be angry or withdrawn.
- ▶▶ Let children know who they can talk to about the death. For example, encourage them to say who they think they might like to talk to when they are feeling sad. Assure them that it is ok to talk to friends, teachers and trusted adults.

- ▶▶▶ Continue to offer children reassurance and support in the days, weeks and months ahead as they make their own journey through the grieving process.
- ▶▶▶ When a child dies, the surviving child/children are also grieving. They can often idealise the child who died, feel unable to fill that child's role and feel they may not be good enough for the parent.
- ▶▶▶ It is really important that parents and carers take time to reassure children about their own worth and place in the family.
- ▶▶▶ Due to their increased understanding/information about death, be aware that children may become more concerned about their own health and the health of other significant people in their lives. The death of someone close may make children feel insecure.
- ▶▶▶ Try to be open to the questions children might have from time to time, but if you do not have the answer its ok to say 'I don't have an answer to that question right now but maybe we will talk about it again.'

Who Should Tell the Child?

- ▶▶▶ In general, the news is best shared by an adult to whom the child feels closest. If a family member is dying, the news is best told by a parent. If at all possible children should be allowed to talk directly to the dying loved one so that they can share their feelings and say loving farewells.
- ▶▶▶ If a death is sudden, the child will probably feel most protected if informed by a familiar close family member, preferably a parent. If this is not possible and the child is told by another adult, try as soon as possible to ensure that the child is reunited with a trusted adult, preferably a parent, who can repeat the news. Otherwise children may have greater difficulty in accepting the loss and may distance him/herself from this reality.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Children's understanding of death depends on their age and stage of development. Their view of the world and their understanding of death changes as they get older. The following are some guidelines regarding children's understanding of death at different ages and what you might do to help at each stage.

Infancy (0–2 years)

- ▶▶▶ Infants have no understanding of death, but they do react to separation.
- ▶▶▶ Fear of separation is activated through the physical and emotional absence of the parent or carer.
- ▶▶▶ Infants are very sensitive to parent's anxieties and they pick up messages and distress signals from them.

What can you do?

- ▶▶▶ Good consistent nurturing will help you to meet your child's needs.
- ▶▶▶ Keeping to routines of feeding and sleeping are very important for babies and help them to feel secure.
- ▶▶▶ Provide as much love and cuddles as you are able to, given all the other demands on you at this time.

Pre-school Age (3–5 years)

- ▶▶▶ Children will search for the missing parent/carer and repeatedly ask the same questions. At this age children tend not to see death as permanent but see it as reversible and temporary.
- ▶▶▶ They may often become confused by explanations and may need to be told repeatedly about the death.
- ▶▶▶ Children of this age believe in magic and often make a link between their own thoughts, actions and wishes, and outcomes over which they actually have no control. If a child has been angry and wished somebody away or dead then he or she may feel responsible and guilty about a death.
- ▶▶▶ Children of this age often regard sleeping and death as being the same. The difference needs to be explained.
- ▶▶▶ A return to earlier behaviour patterns such as temper tantrums, clinginess, wanting to be picked up and thumb sucking may be experienced by children going through a loss.
- ▶▶▶ Experience of death at this age can undermine self confidence and the child's world can become unreliable and insecure. Try to keep routines like mealtimes, bathtimes and bedtimes as regular as possible.

What can you do?

- ▶▶▶ It is better for children if they can remain in their own home environment or pre-school.
- ▶▶▶ Enlist the teacher's help in supporting the child.
- ▶▶▶ Tell the truth using simple language.
- ▶▶▶ Reassure your child and answer any questions he or she might have as best you can.
- ▶▶▶ Encourage children to express themselves through their play activities.

School Age Children (6–8 years)

- ▶▶▶ Children at this age find themselves in a wider social network, which places more demands on the grieving child. Mixing with peers and adults confronts them with a clearer knowledge of death.
- ▶▶▶ Children's reaction to death will vary. It can range from denial, when the pain of the loss is too difficult, to an acceptance that death is real, universal and final.

- ▶▶▶ Children in this age group may have definite views of what death is about and may become quite preoccupied with dying, death and practical details, for example, 'Can people breath in coffins?', 'How do they get to heaven?', 'How do they keep warm and eat?' The younger child may be curious about coffins, burial services and see death as reversible. As they get closer to the age of eight they may begin to accept the finality of death and that death happens to everybody.
- ▶▶▶ Peers are important to children and they may worry or be concerned about the ways in which their friends will respond to them.
- ▶▶▶ Some other grief reactions may include inability to concentrate, guilt, loneliness, feelings of rejection or blaming themselves. Children are aware of other people's reactions and may feel responsible for minding the surviving family members.

What can you do?

- ▶▶▶ Tell children that it is okay to talk and cry about the dead person.
- ▶▶▶ Give an honest explanation of the death. If you don't know all the answers to the child's questions, it is ok to say so.
- ▶▶▶ Encourage attendance at funerals, but abide by the child's decision to attend or not attend. Explore with children what might make them worried or afraid of attending the funeral.
- ▶▶▶ There are no definite rules about whether children/young people should or should not view the body of the deceased, but many say they would have appreciated being given the choice.
- ▶▶▶ Even if they choose not to see the body, it is helpful to describe to children how the deceased looked, as in the absence of some mental picture, fantasy may be much worse than reality.
- ▶▶▶ Try to ensure that your child does not feel overly responsible for the feelings of others. Children may well suppress their own grief at the expense of protecting others to whom they are close.
- ▶▶▶ The child may need your permission to play and get on with life.

Children (9–12 Years)

- ▶▶▶ Children at this age can begin to understand more fully the finality of death.
- ▶▶▶ The realisation that death can also include them can be difficult. It may reawaken old fears and anxieties about separation and loss.
- ▶▶▶ They begin to be aware that not all questions can be answered by adults and that there are unknowns about death.
- ▶▶▶ Much behaviour common among the younger age group can also feature here. Pains and aches and other physical symptoms often appear.
- ▶▶▶ Any previous behavioural difficulties may reoccur as a reaction to the loss.

What can you do?

- ▶▶ Allow time to talk, share feelings and experiences.
- ▶▶ Encourage the child to talk about his or her memories and personal experiences of the deceased.
- ▶▶ Offer appropriate reassurances. Allow for any regression in behaviour.
- ▶▶ Enlist the support of teachers and friends. Help your child to discuss any problems and difficulties he or she is experiencing.

CHILDREN'S REACTION TO DEATH

Children of all ages, even infants, can have grief reactions. Children react to death in a variety of ways. Some children will react immediately to loss while other children can have delayed reactions. Some children will have many of the following reactions, some will only respond in a few of these ways.

Common early responses to loss include:

- ▶▶ **Shock** – Including tears, shivering and sleep disturbances.
- ▶▶ **Numbness** – Inability to make sense of what has happened, withdrawal or clingy behaviour.
- ▶▶ **Denial** – Feeling that it can't be true, therefore attempting to block it out by appearing unconcerned or unaffected.
- ▶▶ **Sleep disturbance** – Nightmares, fear of the dark.

After the initial reaction to the death, your child may experience some or all of the following reactions:

- ▶▶ **Anxiety** – 'I feel sick just like my dad before he died.' Fears about leaving a parent to go to school.
- ▶▶ **Loneliness** – Rejection, crying and searching: 'Why did he leave me?' 'Why did this happen?', 'Where has she gone?'
- ▶▶ **Anger** – 'How could she have left me?', 'Why did the doctors not save him?', 'Why did this happen?', 'Where has she gone?'
- ▶▶ **Guilt** – 'Maybe I am responsible for the death', 'My bad wishes have come true', 'If only...'
- ▶▶ **Wishful thinking** and wishes to be reunited with the person who has died.

Many of these feelings remain for some time after the death and can be quite strong at times.

Between the first and second year after death, loss may no longer be felt so acutely. The child can begin to settle to new circumstances and there begins to be an acceptance of the death. However, some children may not show grief reactions until many years after a death.

The reactions outlined above may not necessarily happen in any particular order. One reaction may predominate for the child or he or she may experience these reactions in a repeated cycle.

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT A POSSIBLE DEATH

It is always difficult to prepare children or young people for the painful reality that someone they love is going to die. However, they do have the capacity to deal with even difficult truths. It is lies or half-truths, or even not being told at all, that confuse and upset children and leave them open to needless worry and anxiety.

What Might Help?

- ▶▶ There is no absolute right or wrong way to break bad news. Do not delay in the hope of finding the perfect formula – there is none. The most important thing is to be open, honest and sensitive to the child's needs.
- ▶▶ If you are not the ill person, make sure you have informed him or her that you are going to break the news to the child.
- ▶▶ Plan in advance what you are going to say. If you feel nervous about telling the child it may help to practice saying the words out loud first.
- ▶▶ Use language that is appropriate to the age and understanding of the child. Avoid complex medical terms.
- ▶▶ If you find breaking the news alone too difficult, ask your partner or a trusted friend to be with you or ask them to tell the child in your presence. This will prevent the possibility of denial.
- ▶▶ Explain the seriousness of the illness and that the doctors will try their best to help but may fail.
- ▶▶ The child needs basic medical information about possible treatments and side effects that may accompany the illness. This information may need to be updated as the illness progresses, for example, if there is a change in the mood or appearance of the ill person.
- ▶▶ Arrange to speak with a hospital/medical Social Worker who may be able to provide support and information to the family as the illness progresses.
- ▶▶ The child needs to be reassured that he or she or other loved ones cannot 'catch' the illness and become sick also.
- ▶▶ The child may find the time gap between hearing the news of the impending death and the event itself unbearable, so timing is important. Over time, give the child information in manageable amounts. For example, 'Mum is very sick and she needs to spend time in hospital where the doctors will try to help her get better.' Then later, 'Mum is still very sick and the doctors may not be able to

make her better.' Then, 'Mum has become sicker and she is not going to get better. Mum is going to die.'

- ▶▶ Be prepared to answer repeated questions.
- ▶▶ It is okay to say that you don't know and that you will find out, or 'That is all I know or can say for the moment'.
- ▶▶ The child will also need the message that life can go on and be lived to the end. Try to balance hope with reality.
- ▶▶ Include the child in caring and sharing with the ill person as much as possible.
- ▶▶ Don't be afraid to show your feelings in front of children and young people, for example, crying, and let them know it is okay for them to cry too.
- ▶▶ Remember that when death comes, despite time and preparation, it will still be a shock.

HELPING CHILDREN TO COPE WITH SCHOOL

Having an awareness of the various ways children may react to death will help you support your child's return to school after a death of a close family member or friend.

- ▶▶ In general, it is helpful for children to return to school soon after the death of a close family member. However, it is vital that co-operation exists between teachers and parents on the right time for return. The return to school needs to be thoughtfully planned and supported.
- ▶▶ Sometimes, bereaved children feel they cannot face school at all. They are not sure who knows in school and which teachers or pupils have been told about the bereavement. They may be unsure of what reaction they will get when they turn up for school.
- ▶▶ The school's response to the bereaved child can be helpful to how the child settles back into school. For many children, school can provide a secure, constant and familiar fixture in their lives in a time of upset and change.
- ▶▶ It is helpful if a parent or carer talks to the school principal before/or on the child's return to school, so that teachers can understand how he or she is coping with the death and can respond in the most helpful way. If you find it hard to set up this meeting on your own, bring a family member or trusted friend with you. (Keep in mind that some children prefer not to talk about the loss in school.)
- ▶▶ It is important to pass information about the death on to the school principal and other school staff who have contact with the child.
- ▶▶ As a parent or carer, you may need to give some thought to the kind of information you are comfortable to share with the school. For example, what

information does the child have about the circumstances of the death and how close was the child to the person who died?

- ▶▶▶ Children react to death differently. Some bereaved children may have difficulty settling back into school, others may react by overworking as a way of distracting from the pain of the loss. It is helpful to the child if parent and teachers talk about how the child is doing at school, to share information about mood swings, school refusal or changes in behaviour.
- ▶▶▶ Be alert to the possibility of bullying – some bereaved children become the target of bullying by their peers who feel confused and frightened by death. Also some children become bullies themselves as a way of regaining control over an unpredictable world.
- ▶▶▶ When children are grieving, they have shortened attention spans and may have trouble concentrating. School work and homework may be affected for a time after a death.
- ▶▶▶ It is also helpful for parents to remind teachers when a painful anniversary or birthday is coming up.
- ▶▶▶ It may also be necessary to remind teachers to be sensitive when introducing class activities around Mother's/Father's Day.

FUNERALS

The funeral is an important family event and a way for relatives, friends and neighbours to gather together and say goodbye. As well as the inevitable sadness, there is love and support available to the bereaved.

If you are unsure about whether or not to involve your child in the funeral, some consideration of the following may help you decide what is best for your child:

- ▶▶▶ Funerals provide an opportunity for your child to say goodbye. Saying goodbye is very important for children as well as for adults. Children should be included in a goodbye ritual in an appropriate way.
- ▶▶▶ Ideally the decision to include a child at a funeral service should, depending on their age, be a decision shared with him or her.
- ▶▶▶ Be sure to explain in advance what the funeral is about, what will happen and what the child will see. Significant adults who are known to, and trusted by your child, should support him or her through the funeral and attendant services.

Whether or not a child sees the body of the deceased can also be a dilemma for parents and carers. Like a funeral, viewing the body can provide an opportunity to say goodbye. However, it should generally only be considered if the child had a close relationship with the deceased. If the death was unexpected, it can help the child to make links between the last time they saw the person alive, receiving the

news of the death and the funeral event and so may help them to better understand the death as time goes on. Again, consider any worries the child may have about seeing the body, prepare them for what to expect and take their wishes into account when making the decision. If the body of the deceased has been badly injured or very changed since the death, seeing the body is unlikely to be helpful for the child.

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT SUICIDE

Telling a child that a family member has died by suicide is difficult. It is important that children are told by a parent or guardian so that they are given accurate and truthful information in a way that is appropriate to their needs. Adults also need to talk to children honestly so that the on-going support they provide addresses the children's real needs.

Children frequently know more about the death than adults realise as they may have been told about it by someone else or they may become aware of it from community or garda involvement.

Sometimes children are present at the time of death or when the body is discovered. Talking to them can help them to make sense of what they saw or heard and helps them to understand the reactions of others.

- ▶▶▶ How and when you talk to your child depends on the situation in which the suicide occurred, your child's age and ability to understand and the likelihood of your child talking about the death with other children.
- ▶▶▶ Talking needs to be handled with care, encouraging children to say how they are feeling and giving them a chance to ask questions about what you have told them. Sometimes a parent might need the support of a trusted family member or friend when they talk to their child. As well as being supportive to the parent this also gives the child permission to talk to another adult about what has happened.
- ▶▶▶ All children need basic facts about the death including simple details about how the person died, when they died and where he/she was at the time of death.
- ▶▶▶ Ask the child if he or she wants to know more details and be guided by the response while showing that you are prepared to talk more.
- ▶▶▶ If children say that they don't want to hear more now, they need to know that they can come back to you for more information when they are ready. Over time a more detailed account of the person's death can be given.
- ▶▶▶ Understanding and coming to terms with the reality of a death by suicide may take years. While sometimes children may need to be told of a suicide very

close to the event, exploring why the person died by suicide will need to be returned to again and again.

- ▶▶▶ It's okay to tell the child that, at the time of death, the person felt that he or she had no option but to end his or her own life.
- ▶▶▶ Explore possible reasons why the person, at the time of his or her death, felt that there was no other option but to kill him or herself. Explain that there are always other options, such as talking to people who love you, telling family and close friends how you are feeling and asking for their help.
- ▶▶▶ Children should be educated about mental health and helped to develop self awareness and skills in problem solving. Help them to identify people who will support them when they feel distressed.
- ▶▶▶ Talk to children about the feelings they have for the person who died and about the feelings the person who died had for them. It is important to let children know that nothing they did or said caused the suicide.
- ▶▶▶ It often takes time to establish if the death was by suicide or if it occurred by other means and there are times when the cause of death can never be fully established. Children need to have whatever information is available so that they can dispel mistruths or speculation.

AND FINALLY

Involving children, talking to them, allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings concerning death will help them to understand and work through their fears. As parents or carers you need support too. You can ask for the support you need either from your family, friends, relatives or by contacting the professional services available.

Specific Objectives of Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children

1. To provide information, advice, counselling and therapy to bereaved children and their families.
2. To provide information, advice and training to parents, carers, volunteers and professional staff who are in direct contact with children who experience childhood bereavement.
3. To develop family and group work suitable for bereaved families or specific groups of children as appropriate to their needs.
4. To provide resource materials relevant to working with bereaved children.
5. To promote research in the area of childhood bereavement.

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Barnardos Bereavement Counselling for Children is one of a number of Barnardos services. It is a national service with offices in Dublin and Cork.

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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