

MIND THE GAP

**A Guide for Parents
and Carers of Bereaved
School Age Children
and Young People**



Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

INTRODUCTION

“My advice is that there’s always some place or someone out there who can help. It’s always ok to come to an adult who you trust to talk to. If you don’t talk to them, you can’t get help. Be brave.” (Rebecca, aged 12)

Everything in this booklet is drawn from what we learn in our work with bereaved children, families and professionals within their communities. Death is an inevitable part of life and grief is a universal human process. We cannot shield children from the reality of death or from the pain of their loss. What we can do is accompany them on their journey through trauma, loss and grief with informed support, encouragement and resources.

The **Barnardos Children’s Bereavement Service** offers three circles of support:

1. **Therapeutic Support** for children and their families who have experienced the death of someone close to them
2. **Community Resourcing** for professionals in their communities
3. **National Helpline** open to any adult concerned about a bereaved child

The purpose of this booklet is to provide information that will help parents and carers to accompany bereaved children on their journey so that children are not alone in their grief. We hope that reading this booklet will help parents and carers feel more confident about distinguishing between what is normal and what is a little more concerning in grieving children, and how adults can help.

Mind yourself so you can mind me

The parents and carers of bereaved children and young people are (mostly) also bereaved themselves. This creates the difficult dual tasks of looking after their own suffering, and that of their child(ren). In our initial

contacts with parents/carers, they often say to us 'if the children are ok, then I'll be ok'; however, children have been very clear in their message to us that they need to be able to grieve with the adults in their lives, not on their own – in their own words 'mind yourself, so you can mind me'.

What bereaved children and young people have repeatedly shared with us is that the best way that carers can support them is to be honest about how they are feeling (children are very good at spotting when loved ones are hiding their feelings) and to be open to finding people, places or activities that support them with their own grief.

This is the 'gap' in awareness – *of how children's grief is interconnected with their adults' grief* – that children have asked us to mind. And this is why we offer support to the whole family, as well as to key adults in children's communities.

We are not born knowing how to grieve and none of us can bear it on our own. It is easiest for children when they have good adult role models for grieving.



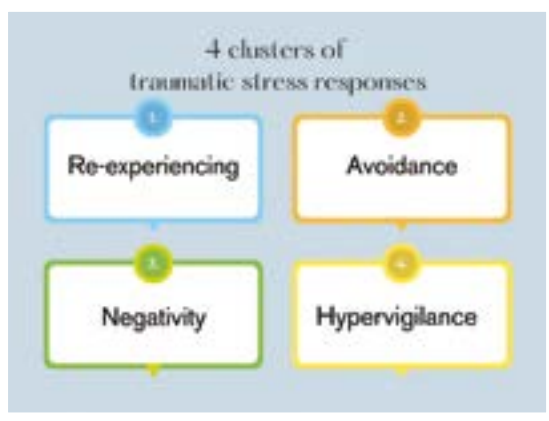
Trauma and grief

Many different kinds of deaths can be experienced as traumatic for children and families. Our brains and bodies are wired to respond in particular ways whenever we perceive a threat to our own safety or the safety of those we love.

These tend to include one or more of the following:

- Thinking back over and over about what happened, trying to make sense of something that doesn't make sense (**Re-experiencing**)
- Staying away from thoughts / feelings about it and anything / anyone connected to this (**Avoidance**)
- Low feeling about oneself / others / life (**Negativity**)
- High levels of anxiety that something else bad will happen (**Hypervigilance**)

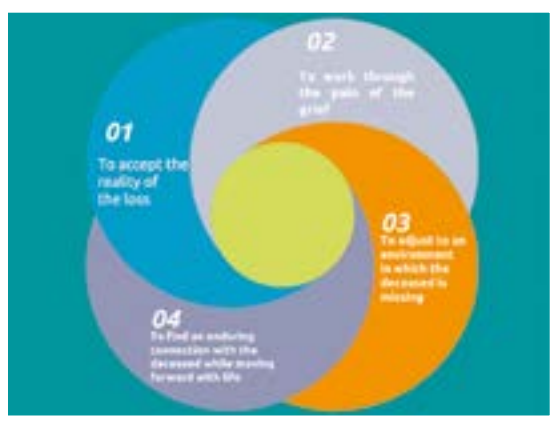
These, also known as *traumatic stress responses*, tend to last for up to three months after a traumatic death (or traumatic experience). They can be scary unless we know that they are normal responses to an abnormal set of experiences.



For some people (who have not had a sense of safety restored internally), the threat of danger and stress continue longer, and prevent people from being able to navigate their grief free of an intense feeling of fear. This is called *traumatic grief* – where the traumatic responses hold people back from being able to sit with the emotional pain of the grieving process. Another way of saying it is that the fear hijacks the sadness.

There are many theories of grief. We no longer look at the grieving process as something that happens in a series of stages. Current theories of grieving focus more on ways of understanding what can feel like an utter upending of our lives and even our personalities as we knew them. Living with grief is often experienced as dividing our lives into 2 parts – everything that happened ‘before’ (the death) and everything that has happened ‘after’. In the ‘after’, every aspect of our lives can be coloured and altered by the impact of the loss.

William Worden’s framing of grief is a helpful guide to understanding the struggle that grieving can lead us on as we try to accommodate this new and unchosen reality in our lives. These are his ‘4 Tasks of Mourning’:



Grief is hard because it is a kind of emotional pain, but when we split it off because we don't know what else to do with it, it ultimately makes everything harder, for everyone. Coming to a place of integration with our grief can take a very long time. If we can learn how to do this when we are young - to acknowledge, understand and grow with our grief - it removes the risk of unresolved grief preventing our cognitive, emotional and relational growth through our lifetime.



DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES AND BEREAVEMENT

Adults are said to ‘swim in the river of grief’, while children are said to jump in the puddles. Children will experience their loss and their grief in very different ways as they grow and develop cognitively, emotionally, and relationally. The following section looks at some of the typical challenges and reactions of children and young people after the death of a loved one, and offers some suggestions of ways in which their trusted adults can be supportive.

Primary School Age Children

Younger Primary School Age Children

Experience of death: If bereaved during this phase of life, it will often be the first experience of the death of a loved one. If so, there are probably many aspects of dying, family rituals and cultural norms that will be new and may need to be explained carefully.

Concept of death: There are several levels of understanding (called cognitive milestones) during these years related to young children’s capacity to understand death. These milestones include:

- **Irreversibility** – the ability to understand that death is permanent
- **Universality** – the ability to understand that every living thing dies
- **Inevitability** – that there is nothing we can do about that

Children will need to go through these stages of understanding regardless of whether or not they are bereaved during these years. Each awareness has an emotional impact and may bring up anxiety, anger or sadness as these concepts become more real.

Common reactions: Initial shock (both at the death and at seeing loved ones in distress), then very little reaction subsequently; night terrors/trouble sleeping; tears; separation anxiety; repeating the same questions; expecting the deceased to come back.

How you can help:

- Share truthful information with children of all ages – they do not need to know every detail about the death, but in order to maintain trust, what they do know needs to be based on the facts.
- Use the words ‘dead’ and ‘died’. Children can become confused with the less factual words or concepts. Remember that they need to learn what death actually means, along with grasping that their loved one will not be returning. This can be a lengthy process.
- Explain rituals (as they happen in your culture and family) and ask what they would like/not like to be a part of.
- Know that younger children may regress – that is, for a period of time they may need the kind of care that they got at a younger age, for example, sleeping in the carer’s bed, special soft toys/blanket, having a lot of physical contact; comfort foods.

- Make sure school is aware. Teachers and SNAs can be so important in planning the return to school and agreeing appropriate supports. Young children who experience a significant bereavement often feel different to their peers, and this 'difference' is usually felt as 'less than/not as good as'. Having good support in school can be central to their ability to manage the rigours of the school day along with their grief.
- Create time and space for immediate family. The child has just experienced the shock of losing an attachment figure that has been a central part of their life – they will need to feel the strong presence and company of other important loved ones as they try to adjust to the (new) knowledge that life can be precarious.

Older Primary School Age Children

Experience of death: Children of this age have more experience/familiarity with loss and with grieving rituals via peer and community groups. They also have an increased awareness of difference from peers who have not lost a family member and frequent embarrassment/not wanting people to know, with this sense of difference.

Concept of death: Children at this age/stage have the capacity to understand what has caused the death. This means that they also understand the nuances connected to different causes of death, their different factors and impacts.

Common reactions: Due to the capacity for understanding causality, older school age children tend to focus more on facts, so there may be a lot of specific questions about the death – what exactly happened; why it was not possible to prevent it; was the person in pain or afraid. They will want to know 'why' and 'how'. Due to their understanding of the

permanence of death they are more likely to be more deeply shocked, afraid, distraught and angry than young children. They may seek to manage their feelings through social media or gaming. They may feel unable to join their peers in the usual social activities, believing that any enjoyment would be disloyal to their loved one. They may ask endless questions, or avoid mention of the deceased entirely.

How you can help:

- Be open with your children about your own experience of the waves of grief. Show them that you can seek emotional support from other adults.
- Create a culture within the family home where all questions are ok. This capacity to be open and to communicate about difficult things will become even more valuable as children grow, develop and re-experience their loss through different ages and stages of growth in their lives.
- Make time together to remember the person who has died, so there is a way of staying connected to the person in daily life, and spend time together as a family where possible. These can both be woven together.
- Support the development of friendships, the exploration of interests and engagement with activities. Empowering life experiences can help to hold the ones over which we've no control.
- Be aware that the transition to secondary school without a loved one present to support them, along with the change in daily routine in a new school environment can feel very daunting for children. Celebrate their finish line and their starting line with them, while acknowledging the absence of their loved one in this milestone also.

Secondary School Age Young People

Experience of death: Teenagers will be familiar with the reality of death and the importance of funerals. They may be less familiar with the experience of grieving, if they have not personally experienced the death of a loved one before. They may become frustrated with their peers who don't necessarily understand what grieving is like.

Concept of death: Young people in this age group have been living for many years with understanding that death is permanent, universal and inevitable. Living with an understanding of the cause of death may be newer. More mature thinking abilities mean that they can hypothesise about what happened as well as what ifs.

Common reactions: Younger teens are already adapting to a new school regime, new relationships and the myriad of changes that adolescence brings. And now there is another huge life change to cope with – it can feel desperately unfair and destabilising, leaving them with little patience for things that they consider to be unjust or trivial.

Teenagers generally will respond to the death of someone close in ways that are sometimes recognisable as part of their 'normal' personality – a teen who may have been regarded as inclined towards worry may now become more actively anxious. A young person who may have been quick to anger may now be unable to contain even minor frustrations. On the other hand, some young people might react in the opposite way – active, outgoing types become withdrawn and seemingly anti-social.

Some will want to avoid speaking too much about their loss and may choose to spend the majority of their time outside

of the house and with friends. This can offer welcome distractions and respite from overwhelming feelings of loss. Some will find that the (relatively) trivial problems of their peers makes them feel isolated in their grief and will prefer to limit their social contacts as a result.

Teenagers are more aware of the existential impact of the death, as the worldviews and belief systems that they have developed during childhood can be shattered by what has happened. They can find it difficult to navigate the normal process of exploring the meaning and purpose of life, without the inner map that they had been working on before the death.

How you can help:

- Know that often normal grieving can become confused with normal adolescent development. Frustration, anger, a sense of great unfairness, overwhelm, and anxiety are all emotions that could be said to be common features of both adolescence and of grieving. It is important not to forget that brain chemistry changes and hormonal fluctuations are part and parcel of teenage development and that much of the emotional intensity of this period is likely to be related to physiological changes. Processing grief whilst also experiencing significant developmental shifts can be intense – this is a challenge, but also normal.
- Role model how normal it is to grieve. Grief ebbs and flows, intensifies and subsides. It ‘mugs’ you when you least expect it. It follows its own path for each person and we will need different kinds of support, soothing or distraction as our grief changes. Be as open as you can be about your own grief and what helps you on

your tough days. Be sure to have a variety of supports for yourself. Your personal 'scaffolding' offers you the strength to in turn, offer support to your child.

- Equally, be open to enjoyment, laughter and relaxation on days when this is possible – teens also need to know that laughter and love do not mean that they are forgetting their loved one.
- Ask questions and listen more than offering suggestions/guidance. Ask what you could do/stop doing that would be helpful; don't assume.
- Support the process of individuation/independence. Help teens to learn how to identify their own needs and to find realistic and creative ways of meeting those needs for themselves.
- Try to have realistic expectations about school performance and grades – expect that these are likely to be negatively impacted for a considerable period (up to 2 years, commonly) after the death. Grief changes the way our brain functions, so issues with organisation, planning, problem solving, memory and energy levels are very common.
- In terms of social engagement (and parental worries that either too much or too little is happening), it is helpful to spend time really understanding why the young person is making the choices that they are.
- Remind self-critical teens that the extra challenge of grieving, in addition to coping with the challenges of being a teen, is not their fault. Sometimes adults may need reminding too!



A word from bereaved teenagers to bereaved teenagers about some pitfalls to avoid:

There are a few things we may do when we're grieving that are not so ok. Here are a few:

- You may feel like using drugs or alcohol to stop feeling bad. This never works. You are only postponing difficult emotions. They will come back and hit you much harder when you're older.*
- You may feel like driving dangerously or doing other unsafe things that you would never have considered before.*
- You may feel like skipping school. If you do, it's a good idea to tell a teacher how you feel as, if you really need time off, that can usually be arranged once they understand what's going on for you. If you don't feel up to telling them yourself, try to find an adult who'll speak to your school on your behalf.*
- You may feel like experimenting with sex just to feel close to someone or loved by someone. While the feelings here are perfectly normal, this doesn't work either. And sometimes it can end up with you feeling even more upset.*
- You may feel you should hide your feelings to protect people around you. But they don't need protecting, they generally want to know how you are, even if how you are is awful.*
- You may feel like dropping things you used to be interested in, like sports or dance or whatever you used to enjoy. That's normal, but it's a good idea to pick it up again after a while, a few weeks or months or even a couple of years. It might feel weird starting again, but if you enjoyed it before, you probably will again. And you deserve to enjoy things.*

MAKING SPACE FOR DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

Common realities in bereaved families

Saying goodbye is always hard: Some of the people who call our Helpline in the immediate aftermath



of a death are looking for advice about how to best involve children in the funeral in a way that helps them say their own goodbye. Often, this is because the death was sudden and so there was no chance to say goodbye in life. Others phone months or years afterward and are looking for ways to help a child who is really missing the person who died, to be able to honour their loss now that the enormity of this is clearer.

Everything is different: The death of a loved one can shatter our core assumptions about what is supposed to happen and not supposed to happen in life. Our worldviews and belief systems can be significantly challenged or changed. Some other changes that are also very painful to navigate are: the realities of a changed family unit; loss of a family home; changed roles within the family structure; new primary caregivers; children experiencing a sibling bereavement becoming an only child or now finding themselves as a youngest/eldest child.

There are other stressful things going on, too: One of the realities we hear is that grief can make things that were already hard, harder. Sometimes there were different kinds

of stressors / losses before someone died which were difficult to manage or had not yet received the right support. Another reality we hear is that a death can create new hardships. New, additional stressors / losses can simply feel overwhelming. In both cases, these difficulties compound the stress of managing traumatic responses and grief due to the death. Everything can get mixed up together and it can be hard to know where to start in regards to creating a support plan.

Common questions from parents and carers

What to tell the children? If the cause of death is unknown, or if the death was due to suicide, or overdose, or homicide, many parents/carers are at a loss of where to begin and how to share information that will help a child rather than cause more hurt. Sometimes everyone tries to protect each other by saying nothing, but that makes things harder. Our advice is always to be honest with the child, in an age appropriate way, starting with what they already know and providing truthful information that can be built upon as they grow. Knowing that adults will be honest with them helps children learn to trust the importance of the truth and to trust the adults to be there for them through even the most difficult things they can imagine.

Are we going to get through this? What can worry parents/carers most is when they hear their child yearn to be with the person who died, or talking about wanting to die so they can be with them. This tends to be something that young children say who are still working out their concept of death and what happens to people after they die, and is generally a sign of the anguish of their grief and their way of saying how much their heart hurts. Another common worry that parents/carers can have is how much their child is crying,

especially at night going to bed. The crying is actually a very good sign that the child feels comfortable expressing their grief. Another worry can be a child who has difficulty with separating from their parent/carer, or from the comfort of the family home, in order to go to school. This can be driven by a fear that something else bad or overwhelming is going to happen and enlisting the trauma and grief sensitive support of school staff can help to reduce the anxiety.

When is this going to get easier? This question tends to be asked months or years after a death and there is no easy answer in response. One thing we try to talk about is how everyone in a family is living with a different kind of grief, because they had a different relationship with the person who died and thus has different needs along the way. We talk about how grieving is a lifelong process, and as we grow, our knowing how to carry our grief in the way that is best for us grows, too. We talk about how for children it is much harder, in the short, medium and longterm, to go through it alone. We always ask adults if they have anyone providing emotional support for themselves, so they are also not alone in their grief. Often the answer is no, or not yet, because the natural instinct of parents/carers is to try to put the needs of their children first. Our advice is always that the safest environment for a bereaved child is with trusted adults who know how to grieve with them, and for the adults to seek support for their own grief so they know how to recognise and respond to their child's grief. This ultimately teaches a child that it is possible to get through something, no matter how hard, with the right support, and that they can trust their own family to get through anything.

HOW DO I KNOW IF A CHILD NEEDS SPECIALIST SUPPORT?

Children's grief can be immediate or delayed. They can experience many different emotions. They can experience shock, numbness or physical aches and pains or have difficulties eating, sleeping or concentrating or making decisions. They may feel that life is very unfair. These are painful, and normal responses to the death of a loved one.

Research has shown that two thirds of children who are bereaved do not require specialist intervention. The support and compassion of their existing systems (immediate and extended family, friends, school and community) are sufficient to help them to manage their deep feelings of grief and to gradually find their feet in the world again.

A further third of children and young people may require some extra support. For those children who do require specialist help, we generally see 3 qualities to their behaviour that have been apparent over time (3 months+) and are significantly negatively affecting the child:

1. **New, or significantly worse, behaviour that dates from the time of the bereavement.** For example, a previously calm child is expressing anger aggressively and hurting themselves and/or others regularly. Or, a child who may previously have been a little inclined towards worry has now become extremely anxious for themselves and others.
2. **This behaviour is consistent across settings.** It is present at home and in other settings such as school and is not just related to one place or time of day (e.g. separation anxiety in the morning).

3. This behaviour is persistent and resistant to change.

Other supports and interventions have not had much or any impact, and this is upsetting and bewildering for the child.

In our service, we are fortunate to be able to offer systemic support to bereaved children. *We support the child directly, and we also bolster the support they receive from important others in their life – parents/carers, extended family members, schools and other community supports.* It is said that it takes a village to raise a child. When someone beloved dies, it is not just the child who experiences that loss – their ‘village’ also is bereft, and for a time may lose their ability to unite due to their shock and grief. Supporting a child’s ‘village’ to heal itself is an important part of the journey with our service. We strive to understand each child and each family’s unique experience of grief and to help them to find a way of living that allows for growth, positivity and joy, whilst simultaneously acknowledging ongoing feelings of deep loss and sadness. Our hope is that through developing ways to hold both suffering and joy, they will be able to face anything together.



RESOURCES

Books & Workbooks for Children, families and supports

Let's Talk About When Someone Dies

Molly Potter and Sarah Jennings

Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?

Elke Thompson

What Happened to Daddy's Body?

Elke Thompson

A Terrible Thing Happened

Marge M Holmes

When Sadness Comes to Call

Eva Eland

The Invisible String

Patrice Karst

Extra Yarn

Mac Barnett

Happy

Mies van Hout

Hey Warrior

Karen Young



Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine

Winston's Wish

When Something Terrible Happens

Marge Heegaard

When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness

Marge Heegaard

When Someone Very Special Dies

Marge Heegaard

When Someone Dies (Accessible information for children with intellectual disabilities)

www.saintaugustines.ie/resources/when-someone-dies/

Additional Books for Tweens & Teens, families and supports

The Sad Book

Michael Rosen

The Heart and the Bottle

Oliver Jeffers

The Grieving Teen

Helen Fitzgerald

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers

Earl A Grollman

Resources for Parents/Carers and supports

Whats Your Grief www.whatsyourgrief.com

Anxiety in Children and Teens (Karen Young)

www.heysigmund.com

A Simple Guide to Child Trauma

Betsy de Thierry

Irish Hospice Foundation www.hospicefoundation.ie

Irish Childhood Bereavement Network

www.childhoodbereavement.ie

Cruse (NI/UK) www.cruse.org.uk

Winston's Wish (UK) www.winstonswish.org

Dougy Centre (US) www.dougy.org



Three Circles of Support



Therapeutic Support

For bereaved children and families.

Most referrals are received due to sudden, unexpected or violent death.

Both trauma support and grief support are offered through a mixture of creative arts, play and talking.



Community Resourcing

For community-based professionals who are encountering bereaved children.

- Traumatic Bereavement Training
- Professional Consultation
- Critical Incident Support



National Helpline

For any adult concerned about a bereaved child.

Family members or professionals can phone for info, advice, support, resources, or to make a referral: **01 473 2110**

Mon-Thurs 10am-12pm | bereavement@barnardos.ie

Dublin:
23/24 Lower Buckingham St.,
Dublin 1
Tel: (01) 813 41 00

Cork:
8/9 Orchard View,
Ring Mahon Road, Mahon
Tel: (021) 435 76 79

BARNARDOS CHILDREN'S

BEREAVEMENT SERVICE

Cork Centre: 8/9 Orchard View, Ring Mahon Road, Mahon, Cork

Dublin Centre: 23/24 Buckingham Street Lower, Dublin 1

HELPLINE

01 473 2110

bereavement@barnardos.ie