

Supporting Children and Young People through Bereavement from Coronavirus

Information for parents and carers

Clinical Psychology and Neuropsychology

This document can be provided in different languages and formats. For more information please contact:

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We Listen
We Care

The coronavirus has led to the sudden loss of lives across all parts of the world. Children are affected by these deaths too. This can be made more difficult as isolation measures and social distancing can mean that it may not be possible to see people when they are ill, or even to attend funerals.

This leaflet gives information about ways to support young people in relation to deaths at this time and links to resources for children in different situations and age groups.

Supporting children and young people with grief

Whilst it might feel painful, children will feel safer and more secure about things when their parents or caregivers provide clear, honest, age appropriate (see pages 3 and 4) information about the death of someone they love.

Children might not want to talk straight away, but they benefit from knowing that you are there and available should they want to talk.

They might feel more comfortable demonstrating their thoughts and feelings via play or through art. Younger children might display changes in behaviour (eating, sleeping, toileting, interactions with siblings for example), not with words.

Give them time and space to process the information.

Children might need lots of physical reassurance and support, especially at the moment. Hugs can be a great way to demonstrate care, even when it is hard to put things into words.

There is no right way to grieve: everyone does it their own way.

Talking to children about death

Tell the child as soon as possible about the death, in a place where you will be able to talk without distractions. Make time to support them and answer any questions they may have.

Use clear language for example “.....has died.” Do not use vague terms like ‘passed away’ or ‘gone’ which could lead to confusion.

Answer their questions honestly. If you do not know the answer, say that you will find out and let them know.

Younger children may need the information repeating, as well as perhaps having the permanence of death explained to them (see page 4).

Do not hide your own feelings. Show them that it is okay to be upset. This way you can demonstrate that it is okay to let your feelings out and cry, or be sad. It may also make it easier for them to talk to you about how they feel, as showing your feelings might help them to feel more connected emotionally to what is happening.

Make it clear that the death is not their fault. Children can feel responsible when someone dies. This can be made more pronounced if they fell out with the person at some point, or if the death is unexpected.

If the child wants to see the person who has died, then this could help them to understand and give them a chance to say goodbye. Owing to current restrictions, this might have to be via video link or photos.

Explain practical things like who will be taking care of them and if you need to leave them, tell them when you will return. This will help them to feel supported and safe.

Children's developing understanding of death

Children of different ages have different levels of understanding of death. This is a general guide to those levels, but children might progress at different speeds.

Babies

From birth to about 8 months, babies cannot understand that someone has died. They may feel the loss of physical closeness and comfort if a parent or caregiver or someone especially close has died.

Children aged from about eight months

Babies are likely to miss a specific person if they have died, but they will not know why they are not there any more. Babies of all ages may show changes in behaviour as they respond to the loss of an important person in their life.

Under the age of two

Children will have little to no understanding of what death means. They are likely to need telling on several occasions before they start to be able to understand what has happened.

Children from ages two to five

Children will know that being dead is different to being alive, but will not understand that death is permanent. This means they may repeatedly ask where someone is and need death re-explaining, which can be hard for the person doing the explaining if they miss the person too.

Primary school aged children

Primary school aged children are likely to understand what death is, and that it is permanent.

Teenagers

Teenagers may feel quite isolated and separate from their peers, and express their grief in various ways, including risk-taking.

Activities for supporting children

- Recalling favourite memories shared with the person might be helpful. You could talk about them, draw them out together or look at photos or videos of shared times in favourite places. You could even draw or paint pictures of that special place. It might be helpful to think about the things that they did that made you laugh together.
- It could also be helpful to think about ways to say goodbye to the special person.
- Some people might prefer to write a letter or poem to the person who has died.
- Keeping a diary of your own thoughts and feelings can be a way to put them into words and may help them to feel less overwhelming.
- Make a memory box: collect letters, photos and mementoes of your loved one and keep them together in a box of memories that you can look at when you want to. You could do this as a video if you have enough videos and photos of the person.
- Video calls with members of the wider family. These could be a way to share stories and memories about the person who has died.
- Family members could share drawings, stories, photos, songs or poems as a way to remember. This could be informal or in a more structured style, like a memorial event.

If it is not possible to attend a funeral or wake

- Evidence suggests that including and involving children can help them make sense of what has happened and give them awareness of the shared experience and support available.
- Joining by video might be an option. It might be possible to provide videos or recordings to be played.
- Your child might want to write a message or create some art to have displayed at the service or placed in the coffin.
- A family ceremony at home may help.
- Planning for a future celebration of the life of the person once lockdown has eased might help. This might involve visiting somewhere special to the person, or visiting their grave. Including your child as far as possible in this planning and what they would like to happen on that day is likely to help them to feel that there is a meaningful memorial planned.

When should you seek professional help?

People vary in the time frame required for them feeling able to return to normal. Sometimes feelings can continue at overwhelming levels in the longer term and cause difficulties to people wanting to move forward with their lives. In these circumstances it can be useful to talk to your GP.

Further information

It is likely that parents, caregivers and family members will also be affected. If you feel additional support might be helpful, it can be found here:

NUH information

www.nuh.nhs.uk/advice-for-patients

www.nuh.nhs.uk/bereavement-services

Adult bereavement support

www.cruse.org.uk/

www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/

Useful resources for supporting children

Child Bereavement UK

Helpline - 0800 02 888 40

support@childbereavementuk.org

www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/coronavirus

Winston's Wish

Helpline - 08088 020 021

ask@winstonswish.org

Webchat - www.winstonswish.org/online-chat/

www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/

Cruse Bereavement Care

Helpline - 0808 808 1677

helpline@cruse.org.uk

www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/children-and-young-people

Grief Encounters

Helpline - 0808 802 0111

griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk

Activities - www.instagram.com/griefencounter/

Webchat - www.griefencounter.org.uk

COVID info - www.griefencounter.org.uk/serviceupdate/

National Children's Bureau

Support for bereaved children - <https://tinyurl.com/y88ku36l>

www.ncb.org.uk/news-opinion/news-highlights/coronavirus-support-bereaved-children-and-young-people

Feedback

We appreciate and encourage feedback. If you need advice or are concerned about any aspect of care or treatment please speak to a member of staff or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

Freephone: 0800 183 0204

From a mobile or abroad: 0115 924 9924 ext 65412 or 62301

E-mail: pals@nuh.nhs.uk

Letter: NUH NHS Trust, c/o PALS, Freepost NEA 14614, Nottingham NG7 1BR

www.nuh.nhs.uk

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