

A Guide for Families on Bereavement and Loss



Developed by Powys Educational
Psychology Service in response to the
Covid-19 crisis.

The death of someone close to us can be extremely difficult to cope with at any time. However, managing such events during this current time of uncertainty and isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic can provide even greater emotional challenge for children and their families. We hope that in reading this guide families will feel more prepared and able to manage their grief, and to help children to say goodbye, if they are unfortunate enough to lose loved ones at this difficult time.

Every death and every child's reaction to it is unique to their situation. It will be affected by the relationship with the person, the circumstances of the death, the development of the child, their sources of resilience and many other factors. But most children, with the support of a loving parent or carer will be able to manage the range of emotions that they experience and be able to say goodbye to the person that they loved.

This guide hopes to;

- Enable you to communicate sensitively with your children about loss and bereavement
- Provide ideas for supporting children to cope with their emotions and thoughts
- Enable you to look after your own well-being
- Provide information about further help available.



1. Talking to children about loss and bereavement

It is best if you tell your child about the death of a loved one as soon as possible, being honest and open. Sit with them somewhere quiet and tell them that you have some sad news to tell them. Give them the facts that they need without overloading them with information. This conversation is just the start of many that you will have with your child about bereavement and death over the next few months. Let them know that they can come to talk to you and that you will try to answer any questions that they have. The [Sue Ryder](#) charity provide further advice about how to tell sad news to children.



Children have a different understanding of death at different developmental stages, and information should be given to them at the level that they will understand. It is important to use concrete words like 'death' and avoid using terms like 'losing' someone, or that the person has 'passed away', as this can be confusing for children. Below are some guidelines about the developmental levels for understanding death, that may help you to talk to your child at their level of understanding, although this will depend on the individual child.

Children under the age of two

Very young children do not understand the concept of death, however they may experience death as a loss or separation from an attachment figure. They may search for the person, cry, or become withdrawn. It is important to provide continued routines and to receive the emotional attention of their main care-givers. As they grow up they should be kept aware of the person who died and their history as part of the family.

Children aged between two and five

Younger children do not understand the finality of death. They may repeatedly ask about the person as if they are coming back, and may need to have it explained to them a number of times. Children's understanding of language at this age is very literal. You may need to tell them that the dead person has stopped breathing, and that the person will not be coming back. You can also talk about remembering the person in our minds, thinking about them, and the many things that we can do to help us to remember the person. They are likely to be particularly affected by the emotions of family members around them.

Children aged between six and eleven

Children around this age gradually begin to realise that death is final and that the person will not be coming back. They may be fearful about death and associate it with stories and films including 'ghosts' or 'zombies'. They are unlikely to understand the emotional, behavioural and physical responses that they are experiencing, and

will need support to understand the connection between their feelings and these responses. They may be concerned about losing others close to them, and will benefit from reassurance.

Children aged between twelve and eighteen.

Children of this age are more aware of the finality of death, which can be intimidating and sad for them. They may think about the loss in terms of how it will impact their future. The death of a parent may involve the teenager in having extra responsibilities. They may feel that they need to be strong for the rest of the family and may be unable to grieve until they feel others are stronger. Social contact is particularly important at this stage, and they should be encouraged to use their normal methods of remote communication to talk with their friends.

2. Understanding the process of grief

Every child and parent will respond differently to loss and bereavement. Your child will have had their own individual view of what has happened and a unique relationship with the person that has died. Loss and bereavement will bring with it a range of emotions which may include: shock and disbelief, anger, sadness, guilt, fear, amongst many other emotions, and these may change on a daily basis. They may be expressed through physical elements, such as appetite, sleep, and ability to concentrate. There is no right or wrong way to grieve but there are healthy ways to deal with the grieving process.


3. Supporting children with loss and bereavement.

- Normalise emotions/reactions to the event. When we experience a trauma such as losing someone suddenly and unexpectedly, the way our body and minds react can feel quite out of our control and, this in itself can be frightening. Reassure them that their feelings are normal. People grieve in different ways. Tell them that it's ok to feel different to how they feel usually. Reassure them that they will feel better with time.
- Create an atmosphere where your child feels comfortable to talk about their feelings. Talking things through with you will help them to understand their feelings.
- Reassure your child that it is ok to have fun still, and to be happy. Emphasise that the person who died would want them to be happy still. It is important to do things that make us smile when we are sad, this is how we look after ourselves and we should not feel guilty or bad for doing this.
- Activities such as going for a walk together can be a helpful way of encouraging them to chat and engage with you. It is good to spend time together, even if they do not talk about the trauma/loss. If they want to talk, give them some time and space to do so, when they can have your full attention, without distractions.

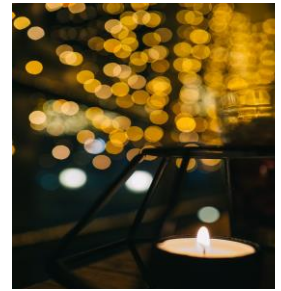
- Provide/organise pleasurable activities to distract them and give them a break from what is going on. Watch a film together, encourage them to do things they enjoy such as going for a bike ride, walking the dog, playing a game etc.
- Try to stay calm and avoid confrontation. They need to work through their emotions, so help them to express and cope with their feelings by being patient. If they get angry with you and cry, although difficult, try to see this as them sharing their feelings and emotions with you.
- Children may feel that life as they knew it has changed completely, and feel a loss of control. This uncertainty, referred to as 'loss of continuity' can be extremely anxiety provoking. It is consequently very important to restore some 'normality' and continuity back into their lives.
- Children may be experiencing separation anxiety and may worry when they are away from loved ones, therefore keep in regular contact remotely with loved ones and friends.

4. Activities to do with your children.

Children and young people may need help to hold on to memories and to express their feelings. Below are some activities that you can do with them to help them to do this.

Talk about the person who has died, and your special memories of them.	Walk to a special place that the person had, or set up a special place in your home, perhaps with a photo or something special belonging to them, where you can go to think about the person.	Write a song or poem for them or about them. Make a playlist of their favourite songs, or songs that remind you of them.	Draw or write memories of times spent with the person who has died. Ask other people for their memories. Make a scrapbook of photos and other keepsakes.
Write a letter to the person you have lost telling them all the things you want to say to them. You could start with "If I had five more minutes with you I would tell you...."	Light a candle or blow some bubbles into the air and imagine that they are carrying messages to the person. 	Create a memory box containing items that remind them of the person who has died – photos, drawings, objects.	Do something that commemorates them, such as planting a tree, or flowers in their favourite colour or the colours of their sports team, or making a donation to a charity.

At this time of social distancing it may not be possible for people to attend the funerals or memorial ceremonies for loved ones. Many of the above activities can be used to help children and families to find different ways to remember people and to say goodbye. You may also wish to plan your own memorial event at home, which could include a short time for sharing memories, poems, readings or prayers, or doing something that has meaning for you.



Therapeutic stories

Sharing stories about loss and bereavement can help parents and caregivers to open conversations with children of all ages, and to help them to understand their loss and to accept that their feelings are normal.

You can watch together an example of a therapeutic story about loss called [The Small Creature](#) by the British Heart Foundation.

Books for Children and Adults to Read Together

The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back. Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong. (Therapeutic story).

Someone Has Died Suddenly. Mary Williams. (www.suddendeadth.org)

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine. (Activity book). Diana Crossley

Books for Younger Children (Nursery and Foundation Phase)

Goodbye Mousie. Robie H.Harris

Dear Grandma Bunny. A Miffy Book. Dick Bruna

Badgers Parting Gifts. Susan Varley

Always and Forever. Debi Giliori and Alan Durant

Are You Sad, Little Bear? A Book About Learning To Say Goodbye. Rachel Rivett

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death. Laurie Krasny Brown.

Books for KS2 children.

Milly's Bug Nut. Jill Janney.

Why Mum? Catherine Thornton. (book about serious illness)

Saying Goodbye to Daddy. Judith Vigna

Books for KS2 and KS3

The Cat Mummy. Jacqueline Wilson.

Sad Book. Michael Rosen

What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? Trevor Romain.

Books for KS3 AND KS4

Double Act. Jacqueline Wilson

Ways to Live Forever. Sally Nicholls

The Charlie Barber Treatment. Carole Lloyd

The Lost Boys' Appreciation Society. Alan Gibbons.

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone you Love. Earl Grollman.

5. Looking after yourself.

In the current situation, this is very difficult time for parents and caregivers, and can be upsetting and emotionally draining for you. If you are going to be a strong care giver, you also need to remember to look after your own wellbeing. It is important that you;

- Take time for yourself to grieve.
- Talk to people about your feelings and memories, and talk about the person who has died.
- Look after your own physical well-being, making sure you are eating, drinking and sleeping/resting.
- Try to maintain normal routines – these provide an important sense of security for children and adults.
- Tell yourself that although this is a difficult time it WILL get easier.
- Allow your children to see your grief and be open about your feelings, whilst being careful not to overwhelm them. Children learn how to deal with grief from those around them, and they need to know that it is good to express emotions.
- See the appendix at the end for strategies that help us to cope during times of stress.

Finally

It is important for you to remember that, as a loving parent, you are doing your best to allow your child to have a safe space to grieve. There will be ups and downs in the coming weeks but over time, your child will recover from this experience and, with your help, will be more resilient because of their experiences.

If you continue to have concerns about your child, then please contact your child's school, or Powys Educational Psychology Service (details of which, along with other useful links are below).

Powys Educational Psychology Service staff:

- Alun.flynn@powys.gov.uk (South Powys)
- Simon.vincent@powys.gov.uk (Mid Powys)
- Lynda.joyce@powys.gov.uk (North Powys)
- Clare.jones1@powys.gov.uk (North Powys)
- Danielle.dekerkhove@powys.gov.uk (South Powys)
- Nia.adams-jones@powys.gov.uk (Mid and South Powys)

[Winston's Wish](#) is a website with resources to support teachers, parents and children and young people when faced with the death of a child, sibling or parent. You can use their website or contact their helpline on: 08088 020021.

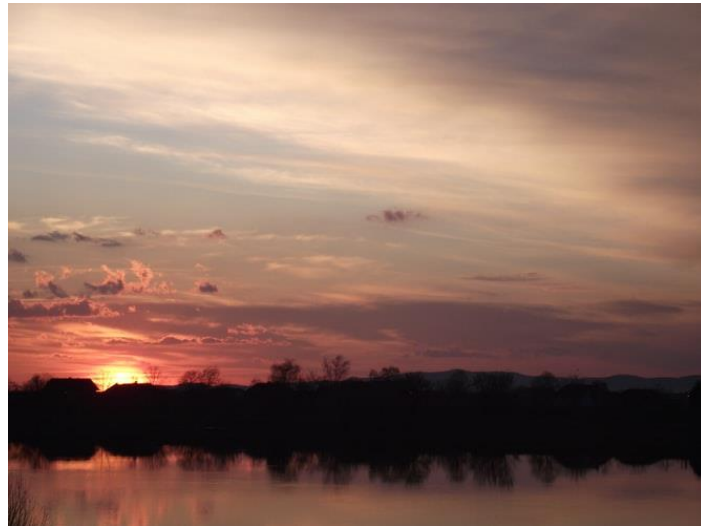
[Cruse](#) offer local support and advice for families following bereavement. They have a dedicated website for young people called [Hopeagain](#).

[Ataloss](#) provides information about support available, with particular information about support during this Covid-19 pandemic.

[Young Minds](#) have information and advice available for parents on how to support their children with bereavement.

[Child Bereavement UK](#) provide support via a helpline and online information for parents who are supporting a bereaved child or when a child has died.

There is also online and phone support for mental health for young people (aged 10-19 years), at [xenzone](#) and [kooth](#) or you can contact Louise Greenwood on 07975590119 or via email at louise.greenwood@xenzone.com).



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Appendix.

How do we cope with stress and difficult emotions?

We all rely on a range of different coping mechanisms each day, in order to manage the general stress of life and to lift our mood if we are feeling low or anxious. We may need to use these strategies more during these difficult times, and we can use them to teach our children to find the ones that work best for them.

These strategies have been put in six different groups. The Acronym **BASIC Ph** is one way of helping understand this, with each letter representing a different group of strategies.

Belief – This can be religious, political, ideological beliefs that help us to understand the world, provide strength and comfort in difficult times and meaning to our lives. This may involve attending religious worship, being part of an organisation whose ideals you value or practicing techniques such as mediation and mindfulness.

Affect - Our emotions can help us manage situations that are difficult. Crying, for example, can be cathartic (provide an emotional release). Laughter equally can help to temporarily alleviate difficult emotions, stress and anxiety.

Social – This can be talking to friends and family that we are close to or other people who have had similar experiences. It can also just involve being around others so as not to feel alone and does not have to involve talking about the loss or talking at all.

Imagination – Engaging our imagination to allow us a break from a difficult experience. Creative activities can be helpful in allowing this (e.g. drawing, painting, and cooking). Watching TV or listening to music can also allow us to have a mental break from our current concerns.

Cognitive – Some people will have a strong need to understand what has happened. Coping in this way might involve looking for the reality, and logic, needing to plan and learn, wanting to gather information, set priorities and consider alternatives. Young people using this strategy may have lots of questions, some of which are difficult to answer. The fact that they are asking is an indication that they are trying to better understand and make sense of what has happened in order to cope.

Physical – Activity and movement supports the body to respond to any chemical imbalance and react and cope by using physical expressions. The methods for coping with stress include relaxation (breathing and yoga type exercises), physical exercise and activity. Expending energy is an important component in many modes of coping. However, physical coping can also involve eating and drinking foods associated with pleasure and comfort and relaxation.