

Supporting Bereaved Children and Young People

When someone significant in a child or young person's (C&YP's) life dies, they can react in very different ways. Some C&YP may not show any obvious signs of grief or stress at all, some may take some time to experience grief and struggle to come to terms with it, whereas others may experience grief immediately.

C&YP's reactions can depend on several factors such as; the closeness or meaningfulness of their relationship with the person; the nature and circumstances of the loss; religious and cultural norms in their family or community; and what support is available to the family.

C&YP can also experience grief when someone close to them is absent for a long period of time or goes away permanently.

The charity Grief Encounter (www.griefencounter.org.uk) has detailed the main needs of bereaved C&YP:

- ◆ 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 a universal part of life
- ◆ Help in finding a new kind of normal

Having a conversation with a child or young person

1. Validate how they're feeling – *'It sounds like you're feeling [...], does that sound right? It's okay to feel like this'*
2. Praise them for being honest – *'You've done so well to talk about [...]'*
3. Offer empathy – *'That must have been really hard for you to talk about, I would have found it tough too'*
4. Reassure them that the way they are grieving is normal – *'Everyone grieves differently, it's completely normal for you to be grieving in your own way'*
5. Reassure them that they have other sources of support, whilst acknowledging their loss – *'If you need more support there are lots of people you can talk to and support services that can help you while you are going through this time of loss'*

Children and young people's understanding of death and reactions at different ages

Infants under 2 have no understanding of the concept of death but are sensitive to changes in their environment brought about by the absence of a significant person. After about 6 months old, infants can experience feelings of abandonment which can lead to their sleep and feeding being disturbed, crying more and being withdrawn in other activities.

Children aged 2 to 5 years old have a basic understanding of death, but do not understand that death is permanent. They may not react straight away and ask lots of questions, including about when the person is coming back. They interpret what they are told in a literal way, so it is important to use clear language to avoid confusion. Children's sleep, appetite, toileting, skills such as language and play may all be disrupted, and they may experience anxiety when they are separated from their caregiver.

Primary School age children develop an understanding that death is permanent. They can be anxious about their own and others' health and safety. Children's imagination at this age can mean that they may believe they caused the death in some way and can develop feelings of guilt. Being honest and giving them the information they need can help them to come to terms with their loss.

Teenagers often have an adult understanding of the concept of death but may have started to develop their own beliefs and views which could go against explanations offered by others. Some young people will respond by becoming more withdrawn, some may show their distress through changes in their behaviour. Others may take on an adult-like role by trying to care for those around them. Some young people will find the support of peers powerful at this time as they move from the dependence on their family and other significant adults.

N.B. Please note that C&YP who have experienced a loss at a young age may need to re-process their grief as their understanding develops and will need to fully come to terms with this, to understand the impact of the loss on the rest of their lives.

Services that offer support for those supporting children

You are not on your own in supporting a bereaved child or young person. There are many services out there that offer support and advice:

Beyond the Horizon, Birmingham

Offers support and counselling for children of school age who are bereaved. Also offer advice and training for professionals supporting the child

Telephone: 01214307529

Website: <http://www.beyondthehorizon.org.uk/>

Edward's Trust, Birmingham

Offers support and counselling for children of school age who are bereaved. Also offer advice and training for professionals closely associated with a bereaved family

Telephone: 01214541705

Website: <http://edwardstrust.keanebuild19.uk/corona-virus/>

Grief Encounter Project:

Provides workshops, one to one counselling telephone advice, resources and an interactive website for bereaved children, young people and their families.

Telephone: 0808 802 0111

Website: www.griefencounter.com

Child Bereavement UK

Has lots of information, advice and support for how to support children and young people of all ages in a range of circumstances.

Website: www.childbereavementuk.org/

N.B If you are worried about a young person and need more support, seek professional advice. It may even be appropriate to arrange for a child to be referred to their GP for further support.

Top Tips

These top tips aim to help meet the needs of C&YP as listed earlier:

1. Be honest with children and young people. Use the age appropriate advice to explain why the person has died.
2. Answer difficult questions about death and their loss. This may be painful if you too share the bereavement with the young person and it may feel uncomfortable to do so. You may not have all the answers. This is okay, you can feel comfortable in saying you don't know to a C&YP.
3. Listen to the child's experience of the death. C&YP will all experience the bereavement differently. Some may blame themselves for the death – reassure them and let them know that this is common, and they are not alone.
4. Be comfortable to express your own emotions. By not being afraid to show your own grief, this will encourage C&YP to do so too.
5. Use clear language when talking about death. It can be difficult for us to find the right words children and young people, and many of us rely on softer phrases such as '*gone away*' or '*gone to sleep*'. Younger children can find this especially confusing as they may believe that their loved ones could come back or be afraid of themselves or others falling asleep.
6. Don't feel that you need to give lots of details about the bereavement straight away. This can be overwhelming for you and the young person. Let the child's questions guide the information you give them as they will show what the child is curious about or uncertain of.
7. Be prepared to answer the same questions. C&YP may continuously ask the same questions. It can help them to feel reassured and process their loss.
8. Take care of yourself. If you have been affected by the loss, give yourself time and space to grieve also. Either way, looking after yourself will make you better equipped to support C&YP.
9. Reassure young people that it is okay to cry and become upset. C&YP can worry about upsetting their parents/family even more if they show their emotions
10. 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 etc.

References

Young Minds 2019 –Talking with your child about a death or loss

Child bereavement UK – Children's understanding of death at different ages