

3. Supporting Children and Young People affected by death

Dealing with bereavement, loss and change can be a distressing and traumatic experience. Where a death or critical incident has resulted in media coverage children may experience anxiety because of what they see and hear on the news and, as a result, may show stronger reactions to a death or critical incident, and may worry that they or others close to them may be harmed.

How children and young people react to death

Many children and young people can show outward distress when reacting to a death, whilst some will hardly react at all. There may be cases where they do not know how to react, as they do not fully understand what has happened.

- The way in which children and young people respond to a death is related to their age and developmental stage. For children with special educational needs, it will be their functional level of understanding rather than their chronological age which will be most helpful in thinking about how they may understand the death and how to support them.
- It is also affected by the nature and emotional quality of the relationship they had with the individual who has died and the particular circumstances.
- It is also influenced by the behaviour and attitude of those around them when dealing with the death.

Below are some broad guidelines and generalisations about how children may respond to death at different ages and stages. However, it is important to remember that all children will develop at their own pace and in different ways.

- **0-2 years:** Infants are not able to understand about death but will experience the loss as a separation; they may become withdrawn with increased crying. The emotional state of people around them can impact, so normality and routine are very important at this stage.
- **2-5 years:** Death is seen as reversible by children of this age, and they may also think that something they said or did caused the person to die. At this stage, children are greatly affected by the sadness of family members; this can cause nightmares, sleeping and/or eating disturbances and violent play.
- **6-12 years:** Children want to see death as reversible but are beginning to understand it as final. They may not understand their own involuntary emotional response to the loss, which might include disturbing feelings of fear and guilt. Behaviour may include immature reactions or outwardly difficult behaviour. Physical manifestations of emotional pain may also develop e.g., headaches or stomach aches.
- **13-18 years:** Young people at this age usually have an adult concept of death but their response and emotions may be heightened and very powerful. Reactions may include anger, depression and non-compliance. The loss may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings.

What can help?

Whilst every child and young person will respond slightly differently, there are things that you can do to help them to understand what has happened, process their own feelings and emotions and, in time, move through the grieving process.

- Be honest and open; explain why the person died at an age-appropriate level. Answer questions as truthfully as you can in a way the child can understand. It's okay not to have all the answers and to say that you don't know.
- Use clear language such as "dead" and "death" rather than what we may perceive as more comforting language such as "gone to sleep" or "loss". These phrases can be confusing for children and may cause them to believe that if someone is lost then they can be found, for example.
- Don't force your child to talk about what has happened but create an atmosphere where they know they can talk about their experience of the death and that you will listen to what they have to say. Reassure them if they misguidedly blame themselves in any way, this can be a common response.
- Talk about the person who has died and share happy memories of them.
- Don't be afraid to express your own emotions and explain to your child that this is a normal part of the process when someone dies. However, don't expect them to look after you as much as you look after them.
- Reassure your child that it is okay for them to be upset too and help them to find ways of expressing difficult feelings which are not disruptive or destructive. Help them to understand that their behaviours may be as a result of feeling angry because they miss the person who has died and don't understand why it happened. Talking this through will help them to better understand their own emotions.
- Continue with established routines as much as possible, encouraging children to engage with their usual activities and interests so that there is some sense of familiarity.
- Don't expect your child to grieve in exactly the same way that you do or that a sibling does.
- Reassure your child that it is still okay to laugh and have fun.
- As the death of a loved one can hugely impact a family routine and structure, you should prepare your child in advance for changes they may face.
- Help your child to say goodbye; include them in discussions about the funeral and allow them to make some choices in how they would like to take part. This may include alternative ways to help them say goodbye such as gathering photos, writing notes, lighting candles, making a memory box, letting off balloons or planting some seeds.
- Allow yourself time to grieve so that you are best able to support your child.
- On the child's return to school, share information with their teacher so that they are aware of what they have experienced and how they have dealt with it. Returning to a different situation may trigger some feelings and emotions which you felt they had dealt with.

4. Sources of Support

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure accuracy whilst creating this document (September 2022), changes may be made by individual organisations in the future.

There is a wealth of resources and expertise that can be accessed by schools or settings and parents or carers.

Below are the details of a variety of organisations that provide support and resources:

National Support

Childline

Telephone: 0800 1111

Website: [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk)

A free and confidential, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in distress or danger. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn.

Child Death Helpline

Telephone: 0800 282 986

Website: [childdeathhelpline.org.uk](https://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk)

A free and confidential helpline available Monday to Friday 10am-1pm; Tuesday and Wednesday 1pm-4pm; every evening 7pm-10pm. The helpline provides support to anyone affected by the death of a child of any age from pre-birth to adult, and to promote understanding of the needs of bereaved families.

Cruse Bereavement Care

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

Website: [cruse.org.uk](https://www.cruse.org.uk)

A free helpline supporting anyone who has been bereaved by death, open Monday to Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), and 8pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. This service is confidential, offering a 1-1 service to clients in their own homes and promotes the wellbeing of bereaved people.

Hope Again

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

Website: [hopeagain.org.uk](https://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

This youth bereavement service, run by Cruse, is free and confidential. It is available Monday to Friday, 9:30am - 5pm and is just for children and young people who have been affected by death. Support includes a helpline, website and peer support.

Winston's Wish

Telephone: 08088 020 02

Website: [winstonswish.org](https://www.winstonswish.org)

A national helpline for anyone caring for a child coping with the serious illness or death of a family member. They are a leading childhood bereavement charity and the largest provider of services to bereaved children, young people and their families in the UK.

Kooth

Website: [kooth.com](https://www.kooth.com)

Free, safe and anonymous online counselling support for young people aged between 10 and 25. Available Monday to Friday 12pm-10pm and Saturday to Sunday 6pm-10pm.

Childhood Bereavement Network

Website: [childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/covid-19.aspx](https://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/covid-19.aspx)

Childhood Bereavement Network supports professionals working with bereaved children and young people with information updates, key resources and networking opportunities.

Grief Encounter

Telephone: 0808 802 0111

Website: griefencounter.org.uk

Email: griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk

Support for children and families who have been bereaved via phone, online chat and email. You can also take part in group activities with likeminded families at their fun-days, grief groups and remembrance days. Phone lines are open Monday to Friday 9am-9pm.

Samaritans

Telephone: 116 123

Website: samaritans.org

Email: jo@samaritans.org

A registered charity aimed at providing support to anyone in emotional distress, who is struggling to cope or at risk of suicide. They operate across the United Kingdom and Ireland and are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year by telephone, email or post.

Young Minds Crisis Messenger

Text: Text YM to 85258

24-hour text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis; texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.

Anna Freud Centre Youth Wellbeing Directory

Website: annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/

A list of local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Child Bereavement UK

Helpline: 08000288840

Website: www.childbereavementuk.org

Local Support**Listening Ear/Butterflies**

Telephone: 0151 488 6648

Website: listening-ear.co.uk/

Email: enquiries@listening-ear.co.uk

Address: [St Nicholas Centre, 70 Church Road, Halewood, Liverpool, L26 6LB](#)

A registered charity aimed at providing a range of emotional and psychological therapies and support services for children, young people and adults.

Liverpool Bereavement Service: Oakleaf Children's Service

Telephone: 0151 475 9001 or 07928 890967

Website: liverpoolbereavement.com

Email: enquiries@liverpoolbereavement.co.uk

A registered charity that is a well-established and dedicated counselling service that provides support on a 1:1 and / or group basis for children and young people.