

When someone close to you dies  
a guide for talking with and supporting children





We would like to offer our sincere sympathy to you, your family and friends who are affected by this sad loss. We acknowledge the pain and distress that is felt with the death of a loved one.

Death can happen at any time of life. Sometimes it is expected, because of illness or ageing. Sometimes it happens suddenly without any warning.

This booklet has been written for parents/carers to explain children's and adolescents' understanding of and responses to death. It also gives some advice to help support children following the death of someone close.

The booklet has been produced by a multi-disciplinary group within Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.



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Explaining death to a child is difficult. Children are deeply affected by the death of a loved one. However, with sensitive support, parents and carers can help children adjust to the reality of death and manage the associated loss and pain.

Adults sometimes feel that it is better to protect children and not discuss a death with them. It is normal for parents/carers to feel unsure of what to say to children when breaking the news about the death of a loved one. However, research and reports from families and children themselves show that children manage and adjust better if they are given appropriate information as soon as possible.

## Children's understanding of death

Children experience similar feelings and emotions as adults when someone close to them dies. How they show these feelings and emotions will, however, often differ and this can be confusing for parents, carers and other adults. Young children are not able to be sad over a long period of time, so they may be very upset one moment and then play and laugh the next. Sometimes they can be very accepting of a death initially and very upset a little while later. We call this "puddle jumping" in and out of their grief. This response is normal and it is important that they are given the opportunity to express their grief in their own time. As an adult it can be difficult to cope with their changes in mood as we tend to be sad all the time. Children's understanding of death largely depends on their age and ability.

Children's response to their loss will be influenced by their understanding of death, as outlined in the following sections. Children, however, develop at varying rates and their understanding of death may be younger or more mature than their age.



## 0-2 years

Very young children do not have an understanding of what death means but they are very sensitive to the upset of those around them. They will react to the loss of their loved one and may look for them physically or if talking, call their name. Infants and young children may show their distress by being cross, more tired than usual, clingy or easily startled. While children of this age do not understand the meaning of death, it is still important to talk to them about it. They will begin to make sense of the unfamiliar words as they grow and develop.

## 2-5 years

Children between these ages may not be able to understand that death is permanent and that it happens to every living thing. Due to their limited understanding, they may not show much reaction when told that somebody has died. Children of this age are very 'literal' in their understanding so the language used is very important. It is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' as this can cause confusion. It is better to talk about 'death' and 'dead', although these words are hard to say to little children. Young children find it difficult to understand that a dead person cannot come back in the future and thus they need to be told repeatedly that when someone dies they can never come back. They may ask questions such as:

- Can you ride bicycles in heaven?
- Can granny still see me?
- Will mummy/daddy be there when we go on holidays?

This is the child's way of trying to make sense of what has happened. While it can be difficult to answer these questions, it is important to answer them as patiently and honestly as possible, reminding the child that it is not possible for their loved one to come back after death.



All families have arguments and cross words and, at such times, children may say they hate somebody or wish somebody was dead. Children at this age are developing their imagination and frequently engage in 'magical thinking' and may believe that their words or wishes during an argument caused the death. It is very important that children understand and hear that nothing we say or think can cause someone to die, as children sometimes blame themselves when someone special dies.

## 5-11 years

As children get a little older they gradually understand what 'forever' means and that death is permanent. They may, however, still feel or hope that they can reverse what has happened ("If I do what mum tells me, [Name] may come back"). As with younger children they will need to be told that nothing we say or think can cause someone to die.

Children understand more about death between the ages of eight and ten years. They gradually understand that death has a cause and that all living things die. It is normal for them to ask questions about death even if they have not experienced a close loss. Children may show curiosity and ask questions about what happens at the time of death or after burial. It is important that somebody who is comfortable with these questions provides answers. It may feel too difficult for you to answer these questions and you may wish to involve somebody outside of your immediate family.

## Adolescents

Adolescents' understanding of death is similar to that of adults. Experiencing the death of somebody close can be particularly difficult for adolescents, as they do not yet have the emotional maturity of adults. They understand the finality of the



death and appreciate the long term impact it will have on their lives and their family life. At this age, they are undergoing dramatic physical, emotional and social changes, which can make them feel very vulnerable and particularly in need of support from family and significant others. Adolescents frequently talk to their friends rather than parents/carers about their experience and feelings. Parents/carers may worry about their adolescent children and how they are managing. It can be helpful to check with parents of friends, school teachers or other significant adults in order to make sure that they are talking to somebody.



## Telling children about the death of someone close

Parents/carers frequently describe feeling uncertain regarding how to tell children about a death. While there is no formula for how to do this, hopefully the following guidelines will be helpful.

- It is helpful for parents/carers to discuss together what they want to tell children before speaking to them. This helps them to receive the same explanation from everyone.
- Talk to your children as soon as possible. If you wait too long, there is a risk of them finding out from others or sensing something is wrong and worrying.
- It is important to be as open and honest as possible and to explain clearly what has happened in language that children can understand.
- The amount of information that children require depends on their age and ability. Young children do not need complicated explanations and it can be sufficient to say something like “[Name] was ill for a long time and the doctors and nurses really tried to make her better but she was too sick and she died”. Older children and adolescents will require more detailed explanations.
- When initially told of the death, young children may be mostly curious about the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of death. Slightly older children may ask about ‘how’ their loved one died and older children and adolescents will also want to know ‘why’.
- It is important to use the word ‘death’ or ‘dead’ rather than statements such as ‘gone to sleep for a long time’, ‘we have lost her’ or ‘gone on a journey’. These statements may cause confusion, particularly for young children who can take them literally and become distressed or frightened of going to sleep, getting lost or going on a journey.





- Younger children need to be told that when a person dies, their body does not work anymore and they no longer need air to breathe. It is important that children are told that a dead body does not feel hunger, thirst, pain, heat or cold.
- It is normal for children to show concern about their own future and they may ask questions such as, 'Can I still go to my friend's birthday party?' or 'Who will collect me from swimming?' It is helpful to offer reassurance about continuing routines where possible or else give clear explanations about other plans.



## Helping children to say goodbye

You may feel unsure whether it would be helpful for your children to see their loved one after death or to attend the funeral. Parents/carers frequently describe this as a very difficult decision that has to be made at a time when they too are grieving. Each situation is individual and people may have very different views.

**Children need to be given the opportunity to say goodbye.**

From talking with children and young people who have been bereaved and from research, it is recommended that children are given the opportunity to see their loved one after death and be involved in the funeral. It is important that they are well prepared for this and accompanied by a trusted and known adult who is comfortable with supporting them and answering any questions they may have. Older children and adolescents may need to discuss how they feel about seeing their loved one after death and/or attending the funeral. It may be helpful to point out the pros and cons to them, to support their decision making.

## Seeing their loved one after death

- Children need careful preparation prior to seeing their loved one after death. They need a clear description of the coffin, the room, who will be there and who will be with them.
- It is important to talk to them about how their loved one looks (eg. what he or she will be wearing) and how the skin changes colour and becomes cold.
- Some children prefer to keep their distance, particularly initially, and they need to know that this is allowed. They may need to be told that it is okay to touch or kiss their loved one but that it is also okay if they decide not to. (You may have been advised that, due to the cause of death, touching the body is not recommended).



- It is important to allow children to come and go as they wish.
- It can be helpful to ensure that you, as a family, have some private time together. This is, understandably, a very emotional time for families and everyone may be tearful or upset. Privacy, space and time together are important.
- It is okay for adults to show an appropriate level of emotion and to cry in front of children as long as they have an explanation for this.
- It can be helpful for children to be given the opportunity to have something of special meaning placed in the coffin – this can be a card, a toy, a poem, a drawing or a gift. It is very important that this is not their favourite teddy or security blanket as they will need these in the weeks ahead; a second favourite would be a better choice.
- Children and young people may indicate that they do not wish to see their loved one. It is essential to try and find out their reason. It is important to determine whether this decision is based on fear or worry (for example, how their loved one may look, concern that they may get upset) rather than a genuine wish to remember their loved one as they were in life. If this is the case, they may be able to be supported in seeing their loved one.
- If the cause of death has been traumatic and there is significant damage to the body, you may wish to seek advice regarding children seeing their loved one. In most cases, a part of the body unaffected by the trauma can be viewed and/or touched.

## Attending the funeral service

- Generally it is helpful for children to attend the funeral service. It is important for children to know what will happen (for example, who will be with them, where the coffin will be) and to be given the opportunity to ask questions. It



can be helpful to have a trusted and known adult with them who is comfortable with supporting them and answering any questions that they may have.

- It may be beneficial for children to be given the choice of having a direct role in the funeral service (such as reading a poem or placing a flower on the coffin) or an indirect role (such as writing the card for the flowers or selecting a charity for donation).
- If you or the children have particular beliefs about life after death, it may be comforting to share them together.

## Attending the burial/cremation

- Some adults prefer children not to be present at the burial/cremation, while other adults want them to be there. If you wish for your children to be present, it is important that they are well prepared and know what will happen and that they are given the opportunity to ask questions. It can be helpful to have a trusted and known adult with them who is comfortable with supporting them and answering any questions that they may have.
- Older children and young people should be offered the choice of attending the burial/cremation.
- Children may have questions in relation to burials and cremations. It is normal for children to wonder and ask what happens to a person after death. It is important to remind them that when a person dies, the body does not work anymore and no longer needs air to breathe or feels hunger, thirst, pain, heat or cold. It is also important that somebody who is comfortable with these questions provides answers. It may feel too difficult for you to answer these questions and you may wish to involve somebody outside of your immediate family.



## Children's needs following the death of a loved one

It can feel daunting trying to meet the needs of your children following the death of a loved one, when you too are grieving and your emotional and physical resources are limited. It is important that you are gentle with yourself, try not to expect too much of yourself and remember that you too need support. Children who are bereaved have a number of needs and hopefully some of these guidelines will be helpful to you.

### Helping children feel secure

At this time it is normal for children to have difficulty separating from parents/carers. Children may follow parents/carers around the house or ask to sit on their knee.

- Unnecessary separations should be avoided and where these are necessary, you should prepare your child for them.
- It is helpful for children to get hugs, cuddles and emotional reassurance. Children need reassurance that, although you are grieving, you are still able to take care of them and that they are still loved and important.
- Re-establishing or creating routines (eg. bed time, meal time, daily activities) will help your children. Children feel most secure when they know what to do and what to expect and routines help with this. It is very helpful to re-establish boundaries and normal rules to help children feel safe and secure.
- Children may experience disturbed sleep following a loss. They often experience nightmares about someone coming to take them away or other family members dying. At this time they need reassurance that they are safe. It may be helpful to leave a light on. Young children may ask to sleep in your bed. As this can be a difficult habit to break, it may be better to reassure them and help them settle back to sleep in their own bed.



- Make sure significant people (eg. teachers, carers, youth leaders) in the children's lives know of the death so that they too can provide support.

## Helping children with their emotions

Children learn about grief from adults and it is alright for you to show an appropriate level of emotion in front of them as long as they have an explanation as to why you are sad or angry. Children need to find ways to show their feelings about the life and death of their loved one.

- Children need to know that it is okay to be sad but it is also okay to be happy, have fun and play even when something very sad happens. They still need to celebrate birthdays and special occasions. It is not unusual for young children to act out their experience of loss through play activities.
- Children have very unique and special relationships with family members and friends, which are often characterised with great love but also, at times, great anger. Following the death of someone close, children often feel guilty about these times of anger and it is important that they know this is normal. They need to be reminded that nothing we say or think can cause someone to die. It is helpful to reassure them that they were loved by the person who has died. Remind them about the good things they did for their loved one, and encourage them to have happy memories.
- Children can display their grief through aggressive behaviour. This can occur at home through temper tantrums or arguments with brothers and sisters, and at school through classroom discipline problems or quarrels with friends. This is their way of expressing anger over the unfairness of their loss. They may blame you for allowing it to happen or be angry that they have been left. Give them plenty of attention for good behaviour and deal firmly with behaviour you feel is unacceptable. You can help them deal with their anger by talking it through with them.



## Helping children share memories

Sharing memories of and talking about the person who has died and looking at photographs, video/DVD recordings and mementoes is important for children.

- It can be helpful for children to have time with the clothing and things that belonged to their loved one. Over time and when you are ready, it is beneficial for children to choose some belongings that they can treasure.
- Other ways of remembering can be filling 'memory boxes' with special things or creating scrapbooks with shared experiences.
- It is important that special memories and photographs are kept for children but especially for the very young who may not have many memories of their loved one.



## Seeking support for children

Many families manage with support from wider family and friends or from other sources such as faith and community groups. If you wish you can discuss your child's response to their loss or receive further information. Similarly if you are worried that your children are showing signs of uncharacteristic behaviour or feel that they may benefit from support outside of the family there are agencies that will support and help.

Contact your Trust for information on local support and services.

### National support organisations

Childhood Bereavement Network	<a href="http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk">www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk</a>
Winston's Wish	<a href="http://www.winstonswish.org.uk">www.winstonswish.org.uk</a>
Child Bereavement Charity	<a href="http://www.childbereavement.org.uk">www.childbereavement.org.uk</a>
<a href="http://www.childbereavement.org.uk">www.childbereavement.org.uk</a>	

\* Information is correct at time of printing.





## HSC Trust information

Each Trust has a Bereavement Coordinator who can be contacted for further information:

Belfast Trust	Telephone: 028 9063 3904
Northern Trust	Telephone: 028 9442 4992
Southern Trust	Telephone: 028 3861 3861
South Eastern Trust	Telephone: 028 9055 3282
Western Trust	Telephone: 028 7134 5171 ext 5545

If you are unhappy about any aspect of care, communication, information or support received and wish to make a complaint please contact your Trust's Complaints/Patient Liaison Department. You can obtain the contact address and telephone number from ward staff.

\* Information is correct at time of printing.



