

Child Bereavement Service

A guide to supporting children immediately after the death of someone close to them.

Telling the child

How hard this is. There is no way we can protect children from the pain of their reactions however much we want to.

The following suggestions come from listening to children telling us what helps them. Children are very much aware of what is going on around them. If adults try to protect them too much they begin to feel excluded and this may lead to anger and resentment later on.

The setting

If possible, choose somewhere comfortable and familiar where it is possible to sit close together.

Who

Ideally a parent or someone very close to the child. It is helpful to have someone else nearby for ongoing support for both of you.

The words

- Use simple language, appropriate to the age of the child.
- Be honest, tell the truth, but find a balance between telling the raw truth and being sensitive.
- Do not use euphemisms such as 'gone to sleep' 'gone on a journey', 'God has taken him', or 'lost'. These will only confuse children and can lead to difficulties later. Use the words 'dead' and 'died', explaining what these words mean if necessary. For instance, a dead person's body no longer works, their heart no longer beats, they no longer breathe, eat, speak, feel pain, they will not come back to life.
- Keep it simple. It is hard for children to take in too much information. Be ready to answer questions, immediately and over the next days, weeks, months and years.
There is no one right way to tell a child bad news. Be open to their needs. Do not be afraid of sharing your emotions. It helps them to understand their own. Find ways of comforting each other.

Viewing the body

It might seem scary to allow children to see a dead person, but it can be helpful for some children - particularly if they haven't been able to say good-bye before the death. It does need to be handled sensitively.

Ask the child what they would like and be guided by that.

Give adequate information to help them make their decision. Funeral directors, nursing staff etc. can help if you do not know all the answers.

Tell them:

- Who will come with them.
- Where the dead person will be (e.g. in a coffin at the chapel of rest, in a bed at home, hospital etc.).
- What the dead person will look like (very pale, cold to touch, not able to react in any way, if they will be wearing their glasses, if their face will be marked in any way, etc.).
- That they may be able to touch (kiss) if they want to, but they do not have to.
- That they may like to take a picture, poem letter or object with them to leave in the coffin.
- That they can change their minds at the last moment and choose not to go into the room.
- Offer alternative ways of saying good-bye (visiting a special place, spending a quiet time together with a photograph, writing a letter or drawing a picture perhaps to leave in the coffin).

That it is OK for them to say 'no'.

Give them time afterwards to talk about how they feel, and to ask questions.

Going to the funeral

Many children will choose to go the funeral if they understand that it is a special time to say good-bye - to remember the person and celebrate their life.

Children who have been prevented from attending a funeral have often told us how upset this has made them feel.

Children need information to enable them to make their choice about whether they should go to the funeral or not.

For instance:

- Why is there a funeral?
- Where is it going to be?
- Who is going to be there?
- What happens in the service?
- Where will the dead person be?
- What happens to the coffin?
- That some people will cry, others won't, and that both are OK – people react in different ways.
- What happens after the service?

Children value being included in the preparation for the funeral - perhaps helping to decide the order of service, choose hymns and readings, maybe writing/reading a prayer or poem (with an adult on standby to help).

If a child chooses not to go to the funeral make careful alternative arrangements of their choosing – not necessarily school.

Perhaps arrange a simple ceremony afterwards, like the letting off of a balloon with a message, maybe at the grave or in a special place – an opportunity for the child to think and talk about the person who has died.

Look after yourself. It is hard for a grieving adult to be responsible for their child during the funeral. It can be helpful to find a named person, less closely involved, to help support each child during the service.

Children's ongoing reactions

Younger children, up to five or six years old, do not have the understanding that death is permanent. They may keep asking when the dead person is coming back.

Children's behaviour may regress. For instance, they may want a bottle again, wet the bed, be afraid of the dark, have nightmares, want the light on at night, have temper tantrums and behave in a variety of challenging ways. They need lots of love, cuddles, understanding and patience.

They may become very clingy, be afraid of letting you out of their sight. It can help if you tell them where you are going, when you will be back and for you always to return when you say you will.

Children may behave for a while as if nothing has happened, as if wanting to deny it.

They may feel guilty, as if something they did caused the death.

They may feel angry. Help them to express their anger in a creative way that doesn't hurt others.

They may lose concentration at school or, alternatively, work extra hard for a while.

Children's grief has been compared to jumping in and out of puddles. One moment they are in the puddle - upset, asking questions and seeking reassurance. The next they are out of the puddle ready to play again. Be prepared to jump in and out of the puddle with them, even if your grief is more like being in a river up to your neck.

Children's ongoing needs

Children need:

- To receive extra love, cuddles, reassurance and attention.
- To feel safe. They need to know who is going to look after them. They need to stick to established routines and still have firm boundaries.
- To feel involved. Do not shut them out thinking this is helping them.
- To be allowed to talk and to be listened to. It can help them to listen to others expressing their feelings, to see adults crying. This can help them to understand and express their own feelings.
- To know that it is normal to feel pain, anger, guilt, relief.
- To know that it is also OK to laugh and to talk about the happy times.
- To remember the person who has died for the rest of their lives. Keep the memory alive by talking about the special person, acknowledging special days and planning what to do together.
- It is important that the children's schools are fully informed. Involve the children in this so that their wishes are recognised.
- Children can benefit enormously from meeting other bereaved children, for instance at [Chums](#) workshops.

How CHUMS Can Help

CHUMS offer support to children and their families following the death of someone close.

What is available:

- Home visits for children and families by a trained volunteer;
- School visits for one to one support;
- 3 day workshops (on Saturday mornings) for children aged between 5 and 12;
- Evening workshops for teenagers;
- Parent/carer support groups.

Through activities and group discussion in a safe, non threatening and supportive environment, the children are helped to explore what has happened to them, to understand the feelings they are experiencing and to find ways of coping with those feelings.

These services are free and confidential.

Contacting CHUMS

For further information, advice and support please contact

Dawn Hewitt, Services Manager
CHUMS
Child Bereavement Service
Sundon Park Health Centre
Tenth Avenue
Sundon Park
Luton
LU3 3EP

Tel: 01582 707469

Fax: 01582 707452

Email: chums.cbs@luton-pct.nhs.uk

Web: www.chums.info