

How can I help my child following a bereavement?

A sudden death is devastating for children and their families. There is no time to prepare or say goodbye. In many cases the person who dies is a Grandparent, Great Aunty, Great Uncle, but with the COVID 19 pandemic members of the Ernest Bevin community have had parents and siblings die suddenly. Our thoughts and condolences go out to all these families and this resource provides guidance on how to support your child while they grieve.

Like adults, children affected by sudden death need loving support and information. It is often better to tell children things through honest discussion and involve them in decision making, rather than keep them in the dark and leave them excluded.

During the first few days and weeks after someone dies suddenly it is normal to suffer awful shock. Children and young people respond to shock in a similar way to adults, but they may express these emotions differently. How they respond will be linked to both their age, as well as their previous experience of dealing with loss and traumatic situations. They will also grieve in different ways at different times.

They may cry, get angry, be quiet, be noisy, talk about the person who died, or not talk about them. They may even play, act or behave as though nothing has happened. Their emotions can change quickly, they may suddenly switch from one reaction to another.

All these reactions and many more are normal responses to a sudden bereavement.

The types of reactions children may experience include:

- **Difficulty comprehending death** – depending on the age of the child, it can be hard for them to understand the finality of death and the fact they will never be able to see their loved one again.
- **Denial** – it's not uncommon for a child who is suddenly bereaved to wake in the morning and forget their loved one has died, only to have to remember and re-experience it all over again.
- **Shock and physical symptoms** – given children's limited life experience, they are unlikely to have experienced shock to this degree, which can make it even more frightening. Things like feeling cold and shivery, having no appetite, or feeling physically sick could be particularly distressing and feel very abnormal to a child, despite being a 'normal' response to shock.
- **Need for information** – just as adults often want to know the 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'whys' surrounding a death, so do children.

What helps during this difficult time?

1. Use simple and clear language when informing them of someone's death. Plan carefully what you are going to say.
2. Clear and open discussions with children are so important following a sudden bereavement.

3. Provide time for your child to talk about what has happen and answer any questions they might have,
4. Continually acknowledge and normalise their feelings to reassure them,
5. Try to involve them (even in a small way) in planning the funeral or memorial.
6. Keep talking to them about their feelings to allow them to process them.
7. Keep routines as normal as possible and encourage your child to join in and stay connected with friends.
8. Seek school based and specialist advice if you become worried about how they are coping. (see more guidance)

After a couple of months

After a couple of months, it is normal for a child's more extreme symptoms to begin to subside. The deep grief remains, but the initial shock has subsided. On the other hand, it is also common to find at any time that symptoms haven't subsided, or they have got worse, or there are new symptoms. These symptoms could include trouble eating or sleeping, terrible dreams, feeling angry, crying all the time, inability to work or concentration problems at school, being jumpy or scared to go out, or finding it hard to talk.

Whatever the symptoms, if a child isn't beginning to feel a little better, emotionally or physically, then now is the time to seek an assessment from either your GP or a specialist bereavement service. (see more guidance)

The most common and effective form of treatment following a sudden death for both children and adults is a series of confidential conversations with an expert therapist, who can help someone to talk about what has happened to them and find a way forward to be happy again.

More guidance and sources of information

Sudden

Bereavement Helpline 0800 260 400 (lines 10am-4pm)

[Support for suddenly bereaved people and those who care for them](#)

Child Bereavement Service

Helpline: 0800 02 888 40 (lines 9am-5pm), Live Chat via our website www.childbereavementuk.org

Winston's Wish

Helpline team.

Freephone National Helpline: 08088 020 021 (lines 9am-5pm)

www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/

BBC Newsround

Coronavirus: What to do if someone you love has died

www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/52283247

Guidance resource produced using information from the above organisations by **Mr McCarthy**

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