

COVID-19 support

Supporting children and young people with bereavement and loss

Created by Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service

Introduction

The aim of this guide is to offer advice on about how you can support a child or young person if someone they know or a loved one becomes seriously ill or dies with COVID-19 (or suspected COVID-19).

Difficult Conversations

Telling children that someone is seriously ill, is a very difficult conversation to have. It is natural for us to want to protect them from such distressing news. However, adults have a key role in helping children understand what is going on, providing information and reassurance, limiting media overload for children, and being aware of how their own reactions might impact on children.

It's good to talk to them honestly but calmly about what is happening, and to not ignore or shield them from what is going on in the world. Remember that you don't need to have all of the facts and answers. It's important to be able to:

- Acknowledge their worries
- Reassure your child
- Talk about the facts associated with COVID-19.

Here are some suggestions for how to talk to your child about this:

- Make sure you have the facts.
- Plan what you are going to say and anticipate what questions they may ask.
- Think about when and where you will have the conversation.
- Listen to your child's worries and tell them that it is normal for them to feel worried.
- Explain that some people only have mild symptoms, that most people recover from the illness but that unfortunately, some will die.
- Don't make promises that the person will definitely get better.
- You might give older children all the information you have in one go, but younger children may need small amounts of information given to them over days, weeks or longer.
- It's OK to not have all of the answers to your child's questions and tell them you don't know



When someone dies

Like adults, children and young people experience grief and loss when they are bereaved. There are a number of ways in which you can support children and young people through bereavement.

Some general strategies for supporting children and young people:

- Make opportunities to talk without putting pressure on the child or young person.
- get their views - ask the child or young person what help and support they would like.
- Let them know it is ok to feel guilty, afraid or angry.
- Use books and stories to calm and distract younger children.
- Give time and attention: listen.
- Discourage social isolation, use peer-based strategies where you can.
- Provide opportunities for privacy, children may wish to express emotions alone.

If you are having to support a child through a loss as a consequence of COVID-19 this may be even harder. The child may not have been able to be close to the person with the virus in the days leading to their death, or because they are socially distancing from those who could support them (e.g. friends, other family and teachers). They may not be able to go to the funeral to say goodbye and may not be able to switch off from the situation because they aren't going to school or to social activities outside the house.



Normal Grief Reactions

When someone is grieving they tend to oscillate between two methods of coping - an emotional 'loss orientated' approach, and a more practical 'restoration orientated' approach. Flitting between the two is normal, and is known as the dual process model of coping with loss. However, when someone becomes 'stuck' in one of these phases but does not experience the other it can become problematic.

Normal bereavement can involve any of the following:

- High levels of distress
- Guilt
- Preoccupation with issues surrounding the loss
- Anxiety
- Withdrawal
- Alarm
- Panic
- Insomnia
- Apathy
- Loss of concentration
- Ongoing stress and family problems

These reactions are commonly seen up to two years after a bereavement and in some cases will be seen even later



Grief responses, and how to manage these, can vary according to a child's age. The table below outlines this in more detail:

Age	Concept of death	Grief response	Signs of distress	Possible interventions
2-4 years	Death seen as reversible, as abandonment, not permanent. Common statements: "Did you know my mum died? When will she be home?"	Intensive response but brief. Very present oriented. Most aware of changes in patterns of care. Asking questions repeatedly.	Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, bed wetting, general irritability and confusion.	Short, honest answers. Frequent repetition, lots of reassurance and nurturing. Consistent routine. Play is their outlet for grief.
4-7 years	Death still seen as reversible. Personification of death, feeling of responsibility because of wishes and thoughts. Common statements: "It's my fault, I was mad and wished she'd die."	More verbalisation. Great concern with process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning. May act as though nothing has happened. General distress and confusion.	Regression: nightmares, sleeping and eating disturbed. Possible violent play. Attempts to take on role of person who died.	Symbolic play using drawings and stories. Allow and encourage expression of energy and feelings through physical outlets. Talk about it.
7-11 years	Death seen as punishment. Fear of bodily harm and mutilation. This is a difficult transition period, still wanting to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final.	Specific questions. Desire for complete detail. Concerned with how others are responding. What is the right way to respond? Starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning.	Regression: school problems, withdrawal from friends. Acting out. Sleeping and eating disturbed. Overwhelming concerns with body. Death thoughts (desire to join one who died). Role confusion.	Answer questions. Encourage expression of range of feelings. Explain options and allow for choices. Be available but allow alone time. Symbolic play. Allow for physical outlets. Listen and allow for talk about the death.
11-18 years	A more "adult" approach. Ability to abstract. Beginning to conceptualise death. Work at making sense of information.	Extreme sadness. Denial. Regression. More often willing to talk to people outside of family and peer support. Risk taking. Traditional mourning.	Depression. Anger often towards parents. Suicidal thoughts. Non-compliance. Rejection of former teaching. Role confusion. Acting out.	Encourage verbalisation. Allow for choices. Encourage self-valuation. Listen. Be available. Do not attempt to take grief away.



Be aware of children who may not want to let school know about the difficulties they face. Young children will sometimes carry on as though nothing has happened. Such a reaction can concern, perplex and even anger adults. Children reacting in this way will still grieve, although the process may take longer, recognition of the impact of the event may occur over time, and in small steps.

- Reassure your child that this is not their fault. Sometimes children can start to think that they are to blame for a death.
- Listen to your child's worries and feelings and answer their questions honestly, as best you can. If you think the answer is too upsetting for them to hear, tell them you feel that way.
- Don't feel that you have to hide your own emotions.
- Encourage your child to share their happy memories of the loved one and share your own

- Keep your child informed about what is happening (e.g. funeral arrangements etc.)
- Reassure your child about everything you and other loved ones are doing to keep healthy and safe and remind them that most people only have mild symptoms and will recover (it is natural to worry that others will become ill with the virus and die).
- Allow your child to express their feelings through drawing, writing or other creative activities if they wish.
- Have routines in place (e.g. the same dinner time and bed time each day) to help to make things feel more normal for your child.



Consider seeking further professional help if a child shows:

- persistent anxieties about their own death,
- difficulty forming new relationships,
- strong reactions against talking about the deceased,
- destructive outbursts,
- stealing,
- school phobia.

Saying Goodbye

The national response to the coronavirus outbreak means that children and young people who have a loved one die in this period probably won't have the chance to make the choices they normally could. If your child is not able to attend the funeral, the following may help them to say goodbye in a different way:

- Explain to your child that the funeral will be different because of the situation with COVID-19 but will still be meaningful. Explain how it will be done instead.
- Suggest that your child write a card, or choose an important object to be placed next to their loved one at the funeral.
- Your child could write a poem or tribute for somebody to read out at the funeral.
- Involve your child in planning the funeral, such as choosing the music or the flowers.
- Hold a service at home on the day of the funeral.
- Collect and share happy memories as a family and make a memory box.
- Somebody who did attend the funeral (yourself, a family member or a funeral director) could describe some of the detail as children tend to ask about these things.
- Remembering the loved one on an important date such as their birthday or the anniversary of their death. This might be by visiting their grave or the place where their ashes were scattered.

Remembering a person after the funeral



- Share memories - It's important to continue talking about the loved one who has died - maybe share memories that make you laugh. "I've been thinking a bit about Mum today. Do you remember how she would always change her shoes three times before going anywhere?"
- Look after yourself
- Get further support, if needed



Organisations offering support and websites with further information



Winston's Wish

- Includes a helpful video on how to answer children's questions about a bereavement:
- <https://www.winstoneswish.org/how-to-answer-difficult-questions-about-a-bereavement/>

Child Bereavement UK

- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org>
- National Helpline 0800 02 888 40 (Freephone, Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm)



Hope Again (developed by Cruse, specifically for young people)

- www.hopeagain.org.uk
- Freephone helpline: 0808 808 1677 (Mon-Fri 09:30-17:00)

YoungMinds Crisis Messenger

- Provides free, 24/7 crisis support if you are experiencing a mental health crisis. If you need urgent help text YM to 85258. All texts are answered by trained volunteers, with support from experienced clinical supervisors



Grief Encounter

- www.griefencounter.org
- 020 8371 8455 (weekdays, office hours)

Leicestershire Educational Psychology Service Helpline

The LEPS Helpline is available daily during the coronavirus pandemic to offer telephone advice and support to all parents/carers and professionals
Telephone 0116 305 5100

Monday to Friday, between 9am and 11:30am including school holidays.

