

# Bristol Educational Psychology Service

Breavement & Coronavirus  
Guidance  
for Parents/Carers



# Bereavement and Coronavirus - Guidance for parents/carers

At this time, increased numbers of children and young people are likely to experience bereavement in connection with coronavirus (COVID-19). This document aims to explain how parents and carers can support children and young people who have experienced loss during this uncertain time. The document outlines some key practical advice as well as signposting to further sources of support.

## **Coronavirus and Bereavement**

Dealing with loss can be a distressing, lonely and traumatic experience and in the current situation some of these effects can be heightened. Grieving may be affected in the following ways:

- Due to school closures and social distancing children are out of their normal routines. Restrictions mean that it is harder for parents to keep children busy and occupied.
- Children don't have access to their usual support networks. In a time where we are experiencing significant change and are social distancing, family, friends and schools are not able to offer comfort in the same way. Talking with those we rely on and trust is one of the most helpful ways to cope, so isolation can make it harder to process grief.
- The whole world is affected making it an anxiety provoking time and the death of someone known to the child, can further heighten anxiety. At times like these, when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, children could be worrying about the situation as a whole as well as worrying that they or others close to them may die. The impact of dealing with a bereavement compounded with feelings of worry can intensify grief and make it harder to express.
- Children may not be able to see a family member before they die to say goodbye. The funeral might be delayed and perhaps not everyone will be able to attend due to current restrictions.
- There could be multiple bereavements in one family or community making the grief recurring, lasting and complex.

## **Understanding the ways children respond to death**

Children and young people's responses to death can vary; some can show outward distress whilst others will hardly react at all. There may also be cases when children and young people 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.
- Children and young people's responses to bereavement are also affected by the nature and emotional quality of the relationship they had with the individual who has died and the particular circumstances.

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- The behaviour and attitude of those around them when dealing with the death also influences children and young people's ability to manage and process grief.

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

- 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 have an impact, so normality and routine are very important.
- 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?

While every child and young person will respond differently, there are things which you can do to help them to understand what has happened, to process their 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 e.g. saying that someone is lost may cause belief/hope that they can be found.

Don't force your child to talk about what has happened; create an atmosphere where they know they can talk about their experience of the death and that you will listen. Reassure them if they blame themselves in any way, which can be common.

Help your child to understand the facts of what happened. This can help them to realise that although bad things can happen, they don't happen so often that we need to be scared of them all the time. Also, this may help them to prepare to answer others' questions – if they wish to and depending on their age.

Don't be afraid to express your own emotions and explain to your child that this is a normal part of the process of grief. 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 and help them to find constructive ways of expressing difficult feelings. 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.

Reassure in situations of self-blame; where a child or young person may believe that they have contributed to or possibly caused a death. This can be a common reaction.

Continue with established routines as much as possible; encouraging children to engage with their usual activities and interests so that there is a sense of familiarity. Although children may not be attending school, try to keep to a familiar routine or schedule each day as this helps children to feel stable and secure.

Try to facilitate contact with friends, teachers and wider family virtually and over the phone.

This is especially important while schools are closed and if children are missing their usual support networks.

Talk about the person who has died and share memories of them.

Share information with school staff before your child returns to school, so that they are aware of what has happened. Returning to a different situation may trigger some feelings and emotions which you felt they had already dealt with.

Help your child to say goodbye; include them in discussions about the funeral and allow them choices as to how they might like to take part. At the moment, when funerals are likely to be restricted, find alternative ways to help them say goodbye such as gathering photos, making a memory box, letting off balloons, writing a letter or planting some seeds.

Prepare your child in advance for any changes they may face; the death of a loved one can impact routines and structure.

Look after your own well-being and mental health and allow yourself time to grieve so that you are best able to support your child.

Emphasise that it is still okay to laugh and have fun. Try and encourage engagement in familiar and favourite activities.

Don't expect your child to grieve in the same way that you do or that a sibling does.

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## Sources of Support

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

- [Coronavirus: How to say goodbye when a funeral isn't possible](#) (Winston's Wish)
- [Bereavement: Advice and information for parents](#) (Young Minds)
- [Coronavirus: Grief and Trauma](#) (Cruse)
- [Resources for children and young people](#) (Child Bereavement UK)

### Childline

Telephone: 0800 1111

Website: [childline.org.uk](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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 020 021

Website: [winstonswish.org](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://griefencounter.org.uk)

Email: [griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk](mailto: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 fundays, grief groups and remembrance days. Phone lines are open Monday to Friday 9am-9pm.

### **Samaritans**

Telephone: 116 123

Website: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto: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/](http://annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/)

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

### **Compassionate Friends**

Telephone: 0345 123 2304

Website: <https://www.tcf.org.uk/>

Email: [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk)

A nationwide support organisation for bereaved parents with a local branch – 53 North St, Bristol, BS3 1EB.

This document is largely based on guidance produced by Bracknell Forest's Educational Psychology Service, with their permission.

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