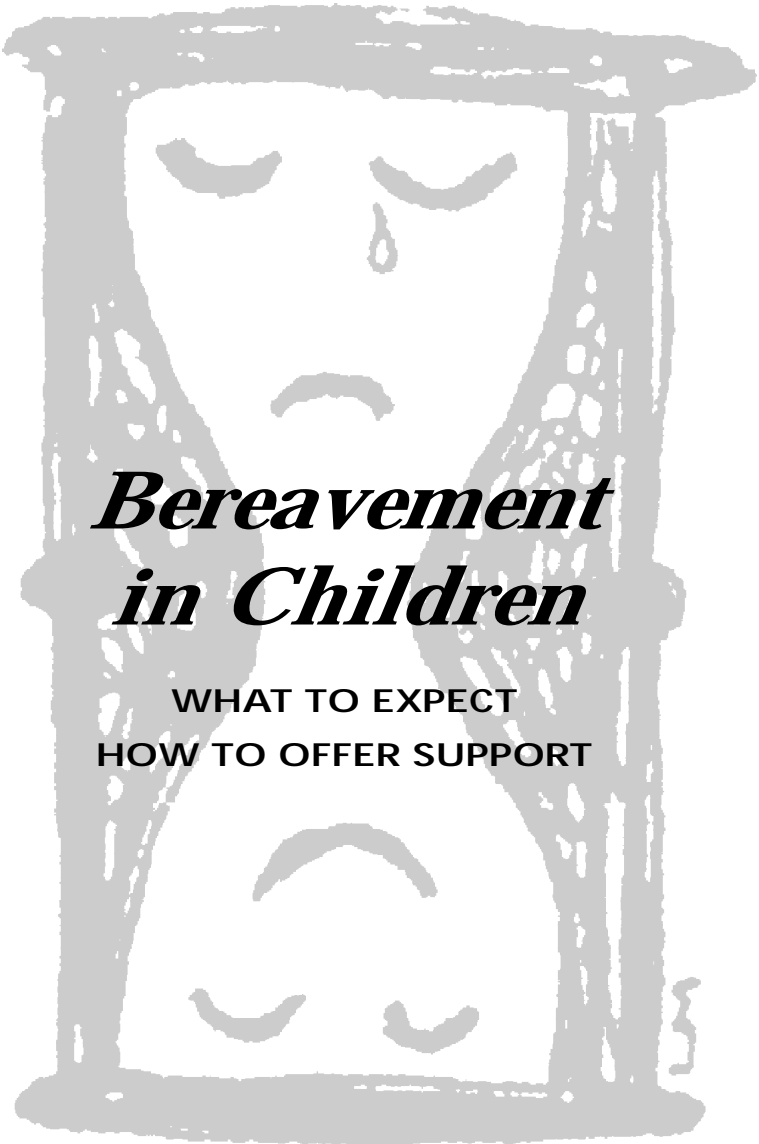


**BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT SERVICE FOR SCHOOLS
PSYCHOLOGY SECTION**



***Bereavement
in Children***

**WHAT TO EXPECT
HOW TO OFFER SUPPORT**



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Bereavement in children What to expect?

Children, like adults, need to grieve

We, as adults, try to protect our children and shield them from harm. If we try to protect them from the reality of death, or try to manipulate the reality of death for them, we are likely in fact to cause them more harm and distress.

To help children cope with a bereavement we must be prepared to support them through their pain, sorrow and anxiety. We cannot make things different but we *can* make a difference.

In order to help support children at the time of a bereavement we need to be able to understand how they think and how they process information. Their grief follows a different pattern from adults in that it varies according to their age and ability. They will probably “revisit” the death as they move through their developmental stages.

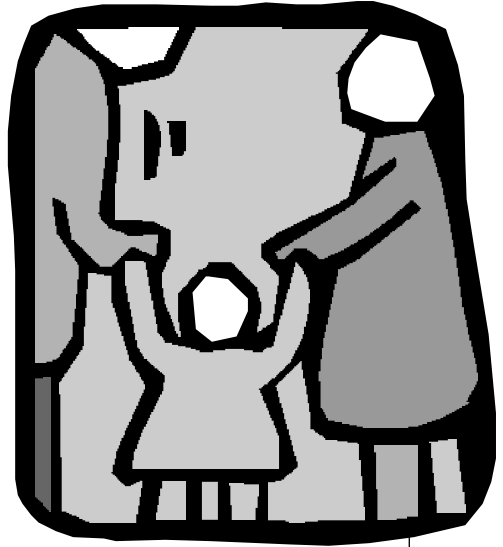
Children’s understanding of death

The literature on children’s bereavement indicates that a child’s understanding of death develops along with his cognitive development which is constantly maturing through childhood. While the development of the concept of death may vary between children the developmental sequence usually follows a similar pattern.

Below the age of 5

Children do not understand that death is final or that life functions have ceased.

- They may ask when Grandad is coming back,
- They may ask whether Auntie will be cold in that coffin.



Children have difficulties with the abstract concept of death.

- They will be confused about how someone who is in their grave can also be in Heaven,
- They will be confused if you say the dead person is just sleeping - why can't they waken up again?
- They may well become upset if they see someone asleep in case that means that the person will die.

Children are also involved in “magical thinking” at this stage.

They experience themselves at the centre of things. They may believe that their thoughts or actions can cause things to happen to them and to others:

- they may think they caused harm/death to someone just by wishing it,

- in games they may play being “dead” or killing people and after the game everything returns to normal. Why doesn't this happen now?

The far-reaching consequences of a death are not yet apparent to them.

This may explain why they react inappropriately to the news of a death; e.g. asking to go out to play after they have heard the news.

From 5 to 10 years

Children in this age-range gradually develop an understanding that death is final and that all life functions have ended.

By the age of **seven** children

- seem to be able to appreciate that death is unavoidable and will happen to everyone,
- they are reluctant to consider it as a possibility for themselves ,
- their understanding of the cause of death is concrete i.e. due to old age, an accident,
- they may assume that the dead person can still see or hear them,
- they can show empathy to a friend who has been bereaved,
- they become occupied with a sense of injustice/justice of things i.e. “it wasn't fair that that happened to her.”
- as they get older there may be, especially with boys, an unwillingness to express their feelings, (due to peer

group pressure, or parents saying things such as “big boys don’t cry”).

From 10 years through adolescence

From this age on the child’s concept of death becomes more abstract. Due to the developmental changes that are taking place during these years the reaction to death can be very intense:

- they reflect on justice/injustice, fate etc. . . .
- they are aware that death will happen to them but do not wish to dwell on this,
- their understanding of death is influenced by their own past experiences of death and dying **and** by the explanations which were given to them at those times.



Reactions to Bereavement and Loss

Children's reactions to grief are varied. The most common immediate reactions can be:

- shock /disbelief,
- dismay,
- apathy,
- continuing with their normal activities



Shock/Disbelief

Older children in particular react in this way. They may refuse to accept the death and so keep the fact at arm's length. This is a normal shock reaction. The event must be dealt with in short steps. This prevents the child from being overwhelmed.

Other Reactions to Bereavement/Loss

- insecurity - they need constant reassurance
- anxiety
- sadness and longing
- anger
- guilt
- inability to concentrate
- physical complaints e.g. pains and aches
- sleep difficulties e.g. nightmares, not wanting to sleep in a room on their own
- difficulties in school (learning/concentration, behaviour)
- regressive behaviour e.g. thumb sucking, bed-wetting
- aggression e.g. fighting, arguing

- social isolation
- pessimism
- a preoccupation with cause and meaning of death

These reactions may last for some time - 6 weeks or more - depending on the age and stage of the child and the circumstances surrounding the death.

How to support children in grief

From reading the literature the following guidelines are suggested for offering support to bereaved children:

1. Acknowledge their grief

- Allow the child to talk.
- Do *not* tell them how they should or should not feel.
- The child's reactions are what matters.

2. Communicate clearly

- Be honest and open - if you cannot answer a question, say so.
- Explanations should suit the age and stage of the child.
- Avoid confusion and do not explain death as "sleep" or a "journey".
- Avoid abstractions.

3. Give them time to process the information

- Answer questions.
- Listen to whatever the child says.
- Look at photographs.
- Visit the grave.

- Accept the child's play/reactions; they are part of the grieving process.

4. Offer opportunities to make the loss real

- Do not hide your own feelings.
- Allow the child to participate in rituals (seeing the dead person - if he/she wishes, attending the funeral).
- Do not remove the dead person's belongings too quickly/keep reminders present.

5. Offer opportunities to develop emotional coping skills

- Talk together about what has happened.
- Ensure that the child is given all the information about the death - but do not dwell on distressing detail.
- Ensure continuity in all routines - as far as possible - in order to give the child a secure structure.
- Avoid non-essential separations.
- Talk with children about their anxieties. Relieve them of any guilt.
- Let them know that they are cared for and loved.
- Allow them to sleep with a light on - and their door open if they wish.

Remember!

- Grief is natural.
- Adjusting to a loss can take two years or more.
- Children may "revisit" a bereavement at various times through their development.

USEFUL SOURCE MATERIAL

- "Grief in Children"
Atle Dyregrov
pub. Jessica Kingsley
- "Good Grief 2"
Barbara Ward & Associates
pub. Jessica Kingsley

PSYCHOLOGY SECTION

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