What can you do... to help someone bereaved in childhood?

Introduction
One in 29 children and young people in the UK have been bereaved of a parent or sibling. That’s the equivalent of one in every classroom. The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that over 100 children and young people are bereaved of a parent each day. More are bereaved of a sibling, grandparent, friend or neighbour. Many of these children will have been living with serious illness in the family before the death.

Everyone around a child can play a role in helping them to manage the impact of the death on their life. Acknowledging what is happening making it clear you are there for them can help. Something as simple as: ‘I heard about your dad and I’m sorry to hear that. If you ever want a word, come and find me’.

How children grieve
Common reactions to bereavement include

- anxiety
- vivid memories
- sleep difficulties
- sadness and longing
- anger and acting out behaviour
- guilt, self-reproach and shame
- school problems
- physical complaints

Some children might show regressive behaviour, social isolation, fantasies, personality changes, pessimism about the future, preoccupation with cause and meaning, and a sense of maturity and growth as a result of being bereaved.
Many of the difficulties which children experience after a death do not last very long, but can be overwhelming and distressing at the time. Some reaction can intensify: as they get older and develop their understanding of the meaning a death has in their lives, young people often revisit their grief, experiencing and expressing it in new ways, particularly at times of further change or loss. This can be a surprise to the adults around them, who might think they are ‘over it’.

‘Family bereavement had continuous, cumulative effects on children’s emotional and social well-being, long after the event happened’ iv.

Particularly when they are already disadvantaged, bereavement can increase a child’s risk of difficulties at school, poor health and involvement in disruptive and criminal behaviour, and reduce their self-esteem. People whose parent died before they were 16 are more likely to be unemployed when they are 30.

What influences their grief?

Often, it’s not just the loss of the person that makes a difference, it’s the other changes that happen as a result of the death. They may have left their previous home and school to move closer to grandparents, for example. The young person will have lost not only the person who died, but their home, their old bedroom, the den in the garden; their school, the corner of the playground at break, their old school friends – and maybe their football or youth club.

Children’s age, understanding, gender and coping style will influence how they grieve. The type of death can make a difference: whether it was expected, whether they had a chance to say goodbye, whether they feel to blame.

Death can be hard to comprehend at any age, but young children who have never encountered it before are unlikely to have the information they need to understand what has happened. They may have many questions about what happens when someone dies, whether the person is coming back, why they have died, what will happen to their body, whether other people are going to die and whether it is their fault.

Much of their response depends on how their family support them over time, providing a warm and consistent environment where it’s ok to talk about the person who has died. Yet when adults are grieving themselves, perhaps getting to grips with being a lone parent for the first time, it can be hugely difficult to find the time and energy to be available to children.

Many children get excellent support from teachers and other members of the school community but others struggle to find the help they need. Their peers and adults around them can often worry about saying the wrong thing, getting upset, or making things worse. This can mean that children are left alone with their fears and feelings.

What can help?

‘We’re unbelievably good at coping when we get help’ (Bereaved young person)

Children and young people say that the following things can help:

- having the death acknowledged
- being given age-appropriate information about what has happened and what is going to happen
- having the chance to express their feelings and thoughts about the death
- being helped to remember
- taking part in opportunities to say goodbye and commemorate the person who has died
- knowing they are not to blame for what has happened
- meeting other children and young people who have been bereaved.
Many children report feeling alone and different as a result of their bereavement, and realising that other people have gone through similar things can be hugely reassuring. This can help children to feel that their experiences and reactions – overwhelming as they may be – are shared by others and a natural response to such a major change in their lives.

**What can schools do?**

**Pastoral support**

A lead person should take responsibility for ensuring that pastoral support for children facing and following a death is proactive, flexible and involves:

- checking with the child and their family how they would like support to be provided
- a system for managing and communicating important information about a serious illness or bereavement, including across transitions from one class or school to another
- bereavement being included in relevant plans and policies
- staff training and support to increase their awareness and confidence, helping them understand how to respond helpfully, and where to get extra support
- swift and easy referral to a range of specialist provision

Schools which have experienced a death in the school community often wish they had been better prepared. By having a policy and setting out clearly how the school will respond to the death of a pupil, parent or staff member or a critical incident can be very helpful if and when it happens.

Knowing what has happened can help all staff be sensitive around, for example, Father’s Day, or when the curriculum (e.g. English Literature texts) involves death and dying, and to be aware of the anniversary of the person’s death.

**Partnerships with local support services**

Many children will cope with the support of their family, friends and school. Others might need more specialist help, and many will also benefit from meeting others who have been bereaved.

There is a growing network of child bereavement services which support children, however they have been bereaved. These local services work with individual children and families and with groups, offering a range of activities to help families communicate, commemorate and move forwards together. Other services may offer support to particular groups of children, such as the families of those who have died at a particular hospice, or those who are bereaved by a specific cause of death. Many also offer training and support to local schools and other children’s professionals in their area.

**Staff training**

Anyone working on a day-to-day basis with children and young people is likely to come into contact with those who are facing or who have experienced bereavement. Training and support increases practitioners’ understanding of bereavement in childhood and their knowledge of practical ideas for offering support, complementing their existing skills in working with children. This increases their confidence and prepares them to respond appropriately to the diverse needs of bereaved children and families, including making referrals to childhood bereavement services whose staff will have had more in-depth training.
Education about death and bereavement

*I feel children need to know more about bereavement not only in case it happens to them but also so it will help them to deal with someone else’s bereavement*’ (Bereaved young person)

Given the numbers of children who will experience bereavement during childhood, there is a strong case for them to learn about common feelings and reactions to loss, coping strategies, and where to seek help. This could improve peer support between children, reducing the isolation – and outright bullying – which some can experience following a bereavement, and helping children to find help for themselves or their friends. These topics can be covered in Personal, Social, Health and Economic education (PSHE): other opportunities exist in the RE, citizenship, English and biology curricula.

Discussing death in the classroom will have particular resonance for pupils who have themselves been bereaved, and this needs to be handled sensitively. Telling pupils in advance about topics coming up, not pressuring bereaved pupils to answer questions or participate actively or having an alternative activity up your sleeve, can give them the confidence to take part. Of course, knowing who might be affected depends on a proactive pastoral support system with some way of flagging those pupils who have been bereaved, and remembering that, in the words of one pupil

‘it doesn’t just go away in a couple of weeks or a month, it’s not like you’re over it. They think you’re ok and you keep having to tell them it’s not ok, you’re not over it.’

Staff too will have their own personal experiences of change, loss and grief, which can make tackling these subjects difficult. They may be worried about becoming overwhelmed themselves, or of opening up a can of worms and making things worse. Lesson plans, guidance and training are available from local and national child bereavement services, which can help staff deliver lessons effectively and confidently. Working in partnership with other organisations can be a helpful way of getting support with lesson planning, preparing pupils and referring on those who might need support.

Resources

Local child bereavement services

Many areas have a specialist child bereavement service, offering a range of 1:1 and group support, and resources, training and support for the wider children’s workforce. Find your local service at www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk.

The website also has details of national helplines and websites for professionals and families including Cruse Bereavement Care, Child Bereavement UK, Winston’s Wish and Grief Encounter.

Websites for young people

www.hopeagain.org.uk
www.winstonswish.org.uk
www.childbereavementuk.org

Apps for young people

www.childbereavementuk.org/our-app/
www.nelsonsjourney.org.uk

Training providers

Many local child bereavement services offer training. Find them at the Childhood Bereavement Network www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk
Child Bereavement UK also offers an e-learning package for schools alongside their face-to-face training programme www.childbereavementuk.org/for-professionals/online-learning/.


4 Jones et al 92013) Family Stressors and Children’s Outcomes. London: Childhood Well-being Research Centre