Bereavement Guide for Families

Haringey Educational Psychology Service

Contents

Introduction

This booklet aims to give you information on how to support your children and yourself in the event of a traumatic incident.

We want to share some information which may be supportive to your children and you as a family during this time.

What are traumatic incidents?

- Traumatic incidents are sudden, unexpected events that cause serious distress.
- They may involve death or serious injury.
- These events can affect not just those directly involved, but also families, schools, and communities.
- People may struggle to cope, make decisions, or feel in control afterwards.

What to do right after a bereavement for your child and for yourself

For your child

Feeling shocked and numbed or feeling a strong urge to talk are normal reactions for those thrown into a major crisis.

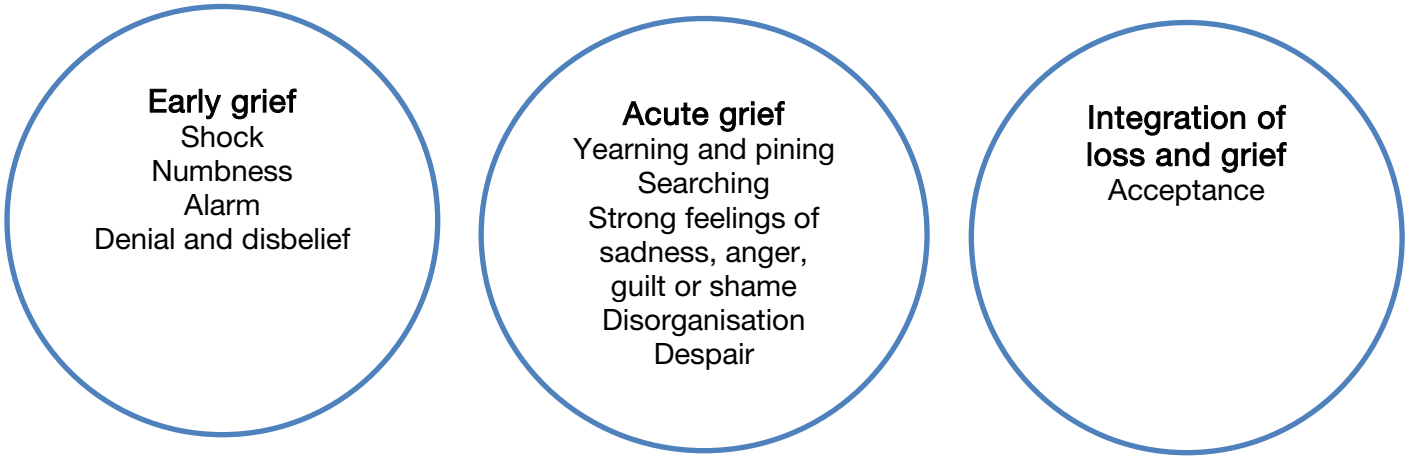
- Let them talk when they're ready. Make time to listen.
- Try to keep daily routines but be flexible.
- Check in regularly to see how they're coping.
- Encourage contact with friends, family, or teachers (even by phone or online).
- Help them find ways to express their feelings—talking, drawing, or writing can help.
- Let them know about support services and helplines they can use.

For yourself

Supporting your child as well as managing the processes can be very stressful. Find time to talk about your own personal feelings with someone you can trust.

Grief and loss

Grief is a normal, essential response to death. It can be short-lived or last a long time. It is an emotional response to this loss. It may affect how you feel physically, mentally and socially. There's no right or wrong way to grieve. The following are some of the feelings or reactions that you might see or feel.



Shock and disbelief
This happens when our model of the world is upset. The bereaved person may feel numb or overwhelmed.

Denial
This generally occurs within the first few weeks and can last minutes, hours or weeks. In this stage the bereaved may behave as if the dead person is still alive and the loss is not acknowledged.

Growing awareness
Some or all the following emotions may be experienced:

Yearning
The urge to search for answers, going over what happened, trying to find a reason or someone to blame.

Anger
It can be directed against anyone including medics; the person who may seem to have caused the death; the deceased for leaving; a God/faith for letting it happen.

Depression
The bereaved person begins to feel the despair, the emptiness, the pain of the loss.

Guilt
The bereaved person may feel guilty for the real or imagined negligence or harm directed to the person who has just died. They may feel guilty about things they have said or done or that they did not say or do. There is a tendency to idealise the person who has died.

Anxiety
In some cases, anxiety can become panic as the full realisation of the loss begins to come through.

Acceptance
This generally occurs much later in the grieving process and often after the death has been re-lived at the first anniversary. The bereaved person begins to make some sense of their loss and to adjust to life without the deceased.

Supporting bereaved children and young people

Children respond to death and dying in different ways, depending on their age and experiences. There are no clear-cut stages, no correct order, and no set time for grief to last, so try not to think of it in terms of a ‘right way’ to grieve.

A child's age influences how they express their feelings and the kind of support they need from adults. It's important that children don't feel pressured to show conventional signs of grief, and that they're allowed to grieve in their own way and time. Parents should also be prepared for young children to move in and out of grief, which can be surprising or upsetting for grieving adults.

How children understand death by age

- **Infants**: Experience death as absence.
- **Ages 3 to 5:** See death as temporary; may blame themselves.
- **Ages 5 to 9:** Begin to understand death is final; may feel overwhelmed.
- **Age 9+:** Understand death more like adults; may show deeper emotional responses.

Some children, however, are very anxious about attending school after a bereavement. Often, this is because they are worried that their surviving family may come to harm. Let the child know that you understand their problem, and want to help, but don't be tempted to spoil them or treat them differently.

By talking about their feelings and receiving support, they will be able to model a healthy reaction to loss.

Children may feel frightened and insecure because they sense other people's grief and stress and feel powerless to help. They will need additional love, support and structure in their daily routine.

Points to remember

- All children respond differently.
- Children act out their feelings through their behaviour.
- Grief is a normal, healthy response, essential for healing, and is a long-term process. It is painful, but normal.
- Work, attention and behaviour may suffer because of their emotional distress.
- The loss of a loved one involves the loss of part of a child's own identity.
- When supporting a bereaved child, keep in contact with their family.
- Children will generally learn how to respond to loss by watching other adults in the family.
- Dealing with a bereaved child will give rise to feelings in you. These are normal and natural. Make sure that you get support for yourself, too.

Suggestions for adults in talking with children and young people who have been bereaved

The patterns for coping with loss and grief begin in early childhood and often continue through to adulthood.

Find time to listen

Always take your cue from the child. When they want to talk, try to make time to listen. If it's not possible straight away, let them know you'd like to talk and suggest a specific time and place. Be patient and reassuring. Gently encourage them to talk about their loss—and do the same yourself.

Expect questions and try to answer them honestly

The child may become intensely curious about death and burial. For example, children may fear or resent a God that takes to heaven someone they love and need. Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know".

Be alert for changes in behaviour in the first few weeks after bereavement

The child may be withdrawn, feel abandoned, helpless, desperate, anxious, apathetic angry, guilty and/or afraid, have sullen moods and lack concentration. These are common reactions and are often acted out aggressively because the child may be unable to express their feelings in any other way. Try to handle them all patiently and calmly; don't seem surprised, and don't get cross.

Help the child to recognise and express their feelings

This will help the child avoid developing unhealthy defence mechanisms, like behaving badly or refusing to talk, to cope with difficult emotions.

Let the child know it's okay to laugh and to cry

Adults and other children may feel tearful at times. It's okay to lighten the mood with memories of happier times shared with the lost parent, sibling or friend.

Believe what the child says and acknowledge their feelings and thoughts

Resist the temptation to make comments such as "I'm sure you don't mean that" if a child believes that they caused their mum's death, or to say to a distressed child that "You'll soon feel better". The child's strong feelings must be acknowledged, believed and discussed. Children have 'magic thinking' and may believe that their behaviour, or thoughts, can cause or reverse death.

Be sensitive to special days

They may revive painful memories. As always, it's best to take your cue from the child.

‘Death’ as part of education

It’s important that death and dying are not seen as taboo subjects. Children need a clear explanation of the cause of death using terms such as ‘die’ and ‘dead’ not ‘going away’ or ‘asleep’ as this merely confuses.

Funerals and memorial services

If your child is attending the funeral, they may need some preparation about what to expect, and it’s important to consider how they will be supported during the service. Parents and children can make this decision together. Memorials and other activities held at a different time can be just as meaningful.

When someone important in our life dies, we sometimes worry that we’ll forget things about them. Your child might like to create a tribute to their loved one, such as:

- lighting a candle
- making a memory box or jar
- writing a message to the person who has died
- decorating some cakes and sharing them
- listening to music
- creating a photo album of precious memories
- making a cushion or teddy bear from one of the person’s clothes.

Your child’s school friends might also want to send a tribute. Ask your child what they would like from them.

If your child wanted to attend the funeral but is unable to, this may be very difficult for them to accept emotionally.

If your child is not able to attend the funeral, there are ways to make the day special and deeply meaningful. For example:

- The service could be live streamed or family members not attending could video call each other and follow the same order of service.
- Photographs could be taken at the funeral and then shown to the child.
- Collect keepsakes from the funeral service e.g. flowers from the tributes to press and keep; a leaf from one of the trees in the grounds; a pebble from the surrounding area; the order of service.
- Children can be involved by offering some suggestions for the ceremony. For example, they could choose a piece of music, select a poem, or suggest flowers.
- Children could write and/or draw cards to be placed on or in the coffin or choose a toy or something meaningful to be placed with the person’s body.
- They could also write a tribute to the person who died which is then read at the funeral.

You may decide to hold a memorial service later which can be planned slowly, with input from the child. This can provide a helpful opportunity to remember and celebrate the person who lived as well as mourn the person who died.

Common questions and answers

When should you tell children that a person has died?

Children should be told as soon as possible to prevent them from finding out through a less appropriate source. Use a normal tone of voice and clear, direct language. Avoid speaking in hushed whispers, as this can create a sense of fear or unease.

How should you tell them?

Where possible, children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where they feel secure. Both you and the child may feel uncomfortable or uncertain, so it can help to hold or hug the child to reduce their fear and insecurity.

What should you tell them?

It is very important to tell the truth, as far as you know it. Even ‘white lies’ may need to be revisited later. Being honest helps prevent rumours and the development of fantasies. The information you provide will stay with the child for a long time, and if later found to be untrue, it may damage the trust between you. Children may not absorb everything immediately, but they will revisit the facts over time and ask more questions as they begin to understand. Don’t worry if you need to repeat your answers.

How much should you explain?

Children vary in how much information they can take in. If your own knowledge is limited, tell them what you do know and try to find out more. In the absence of facts, imaginations can take over, and children may wrongly believe they were somehow responsible for the death. These fears may need to be gently explored and discussed later. Providing an honest, objective account is the best way to prevent misunderstandings.

What if I feel very upset myself and find it difficult to talk?

It’s important for children to see that being upset and crying is natural and acceptable—even for adults. Sharing feelings, such as crying together, is healthier than suppressing them. However, if your grief is overwhelming, it may be better to take some time and space to process your emotions before speaking with your child. Allow your child to grieve in their own way and support them without imposing expectations on how they should behave.

In what ways are teenagers different from younger children?

Adolescents often experience confusing emotions about themselves and the world around them. Grief can intensify these feelings and may lead to depression. It’s better to offer a supportive, listening ear than to try to be overly directive. Teenagers may turn to friends rather than family for comfort—don’t take this personally. Let them know you’re there for them. Creative outlets like art, music, and sport can help them express their emotions and should be encouraged.

How long does it take to come to terms with bereavement?

There is no set timeframe. Some cultures and religions have formal mourning periods, but everyone grieves at their own pace. This can be especially challenging when multiple people are grieving, as they may be at different stages. Grief should be allowed to follow its natural course.

Are some children more vulnerable than others?

Yes, vulnerability varies depending on a child's age, developmental stage, and personal circumstances. Very young children (under 5) are just beginning to develop independence from their home environment, so loss can be particularly distressing. They may also believe they are somehow to blame. Their anxiety may show in indirect ways, such as bedwetting, nightmares, or phobias. They need reassurance and comfort.

Can we help by seeing the 'positive side' of the bereavement?

There can be a temptation to talk about 'new responsibilities' or refer to a child as the 'man of the house' or 'little mother'. This can minimise the child's grief and add pressure during an already difficult time. It may be more helpful to allow the child to regress to more childlike behaviour for a while. Speaking positively about the person who has died—especially when recalling shared memories—can be comforting, but these conversations are often best left until later in the grieving process and should be approached with care.

How can I tell if my child is attention seeking and or genuinely grieving?

This is the most difficult question to answer, because it really depends on your knowledge of the child. It is true that some children, seeing the care and attention that genuinely upset people are getting, will appear to 'try it on' to get attention for themselves. However, even children who appear to be seeking attention may also be grieving and should be treated with sensitivity.

Can the school or a family's religion be helpful?

Yes, both can be very supportive by offering explanations, emotional support, and a sense of structure. Difficulties may arise if the child begins to question religious explanations, particularly in cases of sudden or unexpected death. In such instances, guidance from a religious adviser may be helpful.

How might children and young people react if they do not attend the funeral?

In addition to the wide range of emotions associated with grief, children may feel confused or frustrated if they are unable to attend a traditional funeral. Young people might feel they are letting down the deceased by not being present. For younger children, not attending the funeral may make it harder to understand what has happened, as they miss the opportunity to observe and process the event.

Further help and local support

Visit our bereavement support webpage for a list of local and national organisations offering help after loss, bereavement, or traumatic events:

https://haringey.gov.uk/children-young-people-families/send-local-offer/bereavement-guide-families

Please can also reach out to our Educational Psychology Service — we're here to support you:

https://haringey.gov.uk/children-young-people-families/send-local-offer/education/specialist-teams/educational-psychology-service