

Supporting children and young people to cope with loss and bereavement during the Coronavirus pandemic

The outbreak of Coronavirus means that many aspects of children's normal routines have been significantly and abruptly changed. Most children are spending all their time at home with their immediate family and are not able to have physical contact with their wider family, friends or teachers.

It can feel like our lives are dominated by discussion about the impact coronavirus is having.

This will be an anxious time for many children – they may have questions about how coronavirus may affect them or other members of their family.

It is important to give the time to listen and talk to your child about any concerns they have in general or specific to your family and friends.



A child's feelings of loss

Children may be experiencing different types of loss at this time. Children will respond differently to the loss of a 'normal routine' – extra curriculum activities, school, freedom choice, seeing friends or family. Some children may be feeling a loss of trust or safety in their lives. Others may experience a loss of health themselves or that of their parents/families. Visiting friends who are unwell or loved ones in hospital is not possible at this time, which may be difficult for children to understand and accept. There will be some children who will worry about and/or experience the loss of a loved one in their family or circle of friends.

Experiencing bereavement

During this time of isolation sadly some families will experience the death of a loved one. It may be due to COVID-19, or it could be unrelated. It is natural to want to protect and shield children from death; however, we need to talk to children to openly and honestly about death when it happens to help them be clear about what has happened.

How do I talk with my child about what's happened?

It is difficult to see a child upset, but children cope better with sad news when they are told the truth.

You cannot take away the pain that the child will feel when they hear about the death of a loved one. You can comfort them through their grief.

The best thing to do is to give honest, developmentally appropriate information about death.

Use language which is real and clear 'I am really sorry that your gran died'. Don't be afraid to use the words 'dying', 'died' and 'death' rather than speaking about death in symbolic or abstract ways such as 'loss, 'fell asleep' or 'gone to a better place'. This can confuse younger children and frustrate older ones.

Expect questions, but don't feel pressured to provide immediate answers. Say there are things you don't yet know and promise to find out later on. It is very important that children develop a clear understanding of the death, as this is the narrative they will carry forwards with them through their lives. It has a critical impact on their processing and future mental health. They may ask scientific and spiritual questions about it. Be honest, speak in plain language according to the beliefs of your family, and remember that your job is not to fix the difficult emotions your child is feeling. It is to help your child through the grieving process and understand clearly why someone has died. You are helping them to understand that grieving is a normal yet painful process that everyone goes through, adults as well as children.

Make sure your child knows that it is OK to talk about the person who has died that they are allowed to say the person's name and speak about them whenever they want to. It is OK to recall memories, both good and bad.

What kind of reaction might I expect from my child?

Recognise that every death and every reaction is unique and the way in which a child reacts to a death is dependent on their relationship to the person who died, the child's age and stage of development and their network of support.

Don't assume anything. Ask the child how they feel, rather than what you might expect them to feel. Allow time and space for them to digest the news, to find out the facts and discover how they feel. It may be their first experience of someone they know dying. Young children may not understand the permanence of death and may also seem to 'move on' fairly quickly. They may be distraught one moment, then the next ask for lunch or express annoyance that it is raining outside. Although this sometimes shocks adults, it is very normal. Some days will be better than others, this is hard, but also very normal.

Try to normalise the feelings that a bereaved child shares with you. They may be worried that they are the only person who has ever felt this way. Don't be tempted to try to 'fix' their feelings. Allow them to have and express the feelings that they have. Assure them that anger, tiredness, fear, worry, stress, sadness, exhaustion, guilt, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, lack of focus, etc. are all OK and that you are there to listen and support them when they are feeling these.

Does it matter if my child sees me upset?

Losing a loved one to coronavirus or another unrelated cause at this difficult time in our lives is not an easy subject for anyone. If you are upset do not be afraid to admit feeling sad. The way that you grieve is an important role model to your child. Expressing your feelings will teach them to do the same.

Children get their support from those they trust and who make them feel safe. This means that adults supporting children and young people need to look after themselves and practise self-care. Take some time to think carefully about what you might need in order to provide positive parenting during these difficult times. Make sure you and other adults also have people to talk to, that you and others can experience and express the emotions that bereavement can trigger and are kind to themselves. Know at what points in your day you may need to pass the baton of being in charge to someone else if possible. Take a few moments of time out, ask a relative to read to the children on a video call whilst you take some time to focus on yourself.

What can I do to support my child

You can't protect a child from the pain of a loss. You can give them time, space, comfort and listening whilst they grieve. Most grieving children do not need professional help, counselling or expert support. They do need to feel love and connection with familiar people who care about them. There are a number of things that you can do to support your child when they are grieving.



Be aware of the 6 Myths of Grief

The following 6 myths of grief are strong in our culture;

Grieve alone - it may be the case that a griever wants privacy, but often they need connection with others even when those around them do not know what to say

Time heals - the pain of grief continues, time alone does not heal grief

Replace the loss - there will be no substitute for the person that has died

Keep busy - distraction can provide temporary relief, however it's important that we don't push difficult feelings away by burying them under work or other efforts to stay busy

Don't feel bad - feeling bad when someone has died is normal, and should not be suppressed. As adults we find it hard to watch our children feeling sad, but this is normal. Try to connect and comfort them whilst they feel bad, do not try to stop the feeling itself.

Be strong - encouraging a child to 'be strong' implies that they are weak if they have feelings of sadness. We want to encourage children to express how they feel, not hide these emotions away because they think this is a show of strength to do so.

These myths are not helpful to someone who is grieving. It is important to allow a young person to feel sad about the loss, and to provide comfort through acknowledgement and validation of their feelings and listening.

What you can do:

Be kind to yourself - it is not a sign of weakness if you seek help from others. Don't expect too much of yourself. Managing life and your own grief, at the same time as trying to support a child or young person, is exhausting.

Keep a daily routine – for a child or young person whose life has been turned upside down, a sense of routine, even in these exceptional circumstances will help to give a sense of normality. Creating structure in your child's day will offer a sense of security and continuity for your child.

A listening ear – find opportunities that will give your child an opportunity to talk about what has happened with an adult they trust in a calm environment. Sometimes working on a light activity together whilst chatting creates less pressure. In situations where physical contact is not possible with loved ones, try out some games/activities using video calling.

Relief from grief – the restrictions placed on us by Coronavirus means that it's harder to find ways that you and your children can take a break or seek relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home. Being surrounded by grief can feel overwhelming for everyone. If possible, try to go out for some fresh air and do some exercise every day. Planning an outdoor game or challenge with your child may offer an alternative focus for a short period.

Help them find ways to remember their loved one—here are a few suggestions:

Walk/Bake/Cook

Going for a walk to the person's favourite place or baking/cooking their favourite recipe.

Family Record

This can help a child or young person gain a sense of where they and the person who has died fits into the family. A family tree can be put together. Family photographs, documents, certificates and mementoes can be included. Include stories about the person's life which can be contributed by family members and friends.

Memory Jar

This is a visual way of representing memories. A jar can be layered with different colours of chalk, mixed with salt to represent different memories. You can also add objects to the jar that have significant meaning.

Write a poem or song

Younger children may create stories and pictures of the person who died.

Memory Playlist

A playlist of music that the person who died loved can be helpful as a way of connecting with memories and processing emotions.

Winston's Wish have developed some helpful resources for talking to child about change and loss including telling a child someone has died from coronavirus:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/>

Cruse UK also have developed resources to share how bereavement and grief may be affected by this pandemic. This includes particular sections on grieving and isolation as well as a specific section on supporting children and young people:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

Saying goodbye and funerals

The requirement of social distancing mean that many of us won't be able to attend the funeral of a loved one who dies from coronavirus. The decision for a child to attend a funeral is a very personal and sometimes difficult one and depends on many factors. If the child wants to attend the funeral it is a good idea to allow this and prepare them for what to expect. A funeral is an important ritual which can allow the expression of grief, the celebration of life and a time to be together in saying goodbye. During these exceptional times, however, family members may not have an opportunity to spend time with someone who is dying and it may not be possible for children to attend the funeral of a loved one.



Below are some suggestions about ways of saying goodbye

- **Ask the funeral director if the service can be recorded or live streamed**
- **Write or record a message to be played. This could also be a poem or you could play a piece of music**
- **Set aside the time while funeral is taking place to have your own memorial service at home**
- **Ask someone who is attending to call you afterwards**
- **Hold your own memorial service at a later date when the restrictions are lifted**
- **While children are at home they may want to connect virtually with friends, families and schools to share memories and create ideas together**
- **A useful book to look at with children is 'The invisible String' by Patrice Karst**

Being together in isolation may allow more time to support each other with emotions and feelings around the loss.

The Role of School

After someone dies, you could let someone at school know what has happened even though school buildings are closed. School staff can still maintain contact and be a source of support for a young person.

Useful Websites & Telephone Numbers

If you have any concerns about your child / young person you can access support through the following contact details:

Winston's Wish

<https://www.winstonswish.org/>

Freephone National Helpline 08088 020 021 (Monday-Friday 9am-5pm)

ASK Email service ask@winstonswish.org

Online chat – click the 'ASK US' image on the website, available Wednesdays & Friday from 12-4pm

Free 24/7 text crisis support Text WW to 85258

Childhood Bereavement UK

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Helpline 0800 02 888 40 (Monday-Friday 9am-5pm)

Email for bereavement support: support@childbereavementuk.org

Live chat via the website

Cruse Bereavement Care

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Helpline 0808 808 1677 (Monday-Friday 9.30am-5pm, excluding bank holidays and extended hours on Tue/Wed/Thurs when they are open to 8pm)

Email helpline@cruse.org.uk

Information on Coronavirus:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>