

Supporting Bereaved Children Guidance for Carers

Bradford Educational Psychology Team

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INTRODUCTION

These notes have been prepared for teachers, other adults, and carers who are faced with an individual or group of traumatised children. They are not designed to make you into specialist bereavement counsellors, but to help you try to address the very practical questions that you are likely to face in this situation. Most children with the support of their educational setting, family and friends will deal successfully with bereavement and other traumatic events. However there is much that can be done to help them with this process and this guidance outlines what can be done to support them.

Children are all different and they will all react to loss and trauma in their own unique way. Differences in their levels of awareness, understanding, age, emotional maturity, security, and not least their relationship with the deceased, will all have a significant influence.

As adults we have become more sophisticated and prepared to accept the 'shades of meaning in explanations' but children and even older teenagers still see things in terms of 'black and white'. As a result their questions may be disconcertingly direct and blunt and we may find ourselves being upset by the form of the question, or our perceived inability to answer it fully.

Remember that in the matter of loss and/or death, particularly when it is unexpected or 'illogical', we can only provide some of the answers and certainly not 'make it better', but we can make it 'less bad' or 'less painful'. Children may ask the same questions again and again and you need to be prepared to keep repeating your answers.

If the child feels secure in a relationship with you, it is likely that they will come to you specifically for comfort or enlightenment and it will help to have given some thought as to how you will respond.

Please Note: Not all points below will apply to your particular situation but hopefully they will give you a framework to think about your own responses.

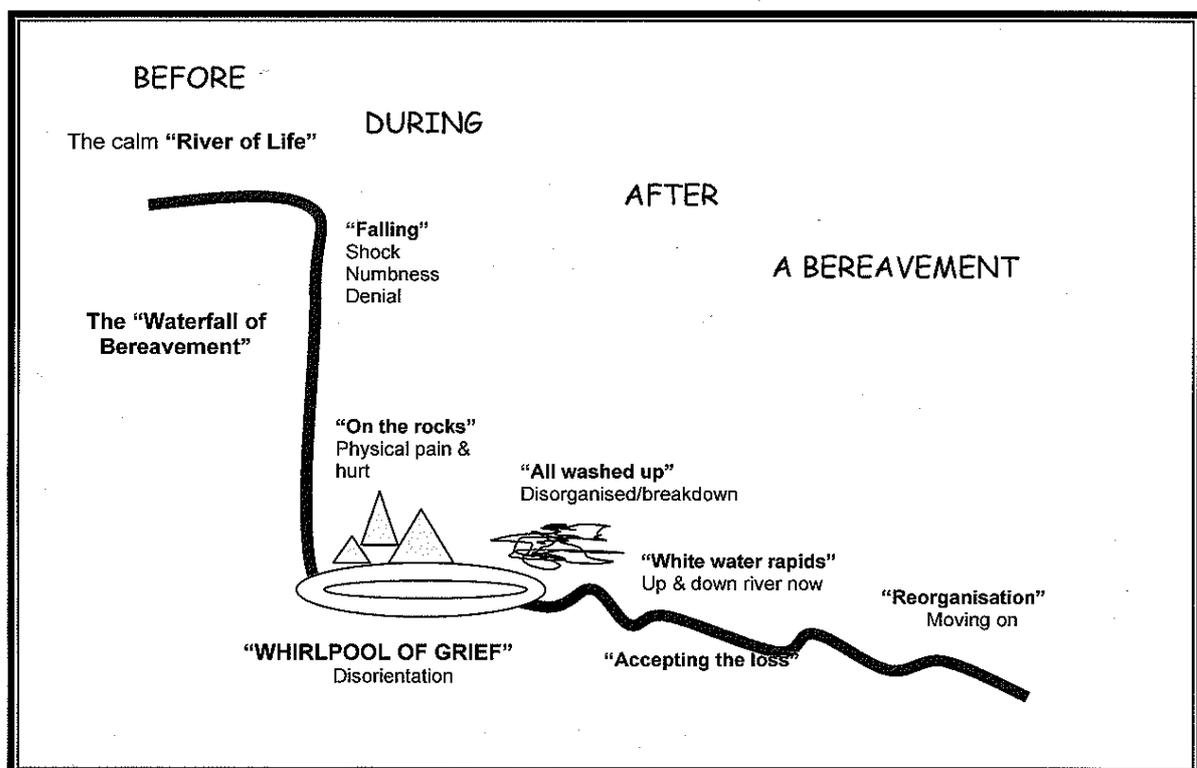
HELPING BEREAVED OR TRAUMATISED CHILDREN?

The General Messages

- The best support for children comes from those they love and trust.
- Try to maintain the child's feelings of security, of being cared for, and of being loved.
- Try to maintain all the necessary practical care for the child e.g. ensuring that they are eating, caring for themselves, sleeping etc.
- Keep up the routines of home and school so that 'life goes on', but be prepared to accommodate some outbursts or extreme reactions by providing time and space for them.
- Try to foster a sense that it is OK to play and have fun as well as sometimes feeling sad.
- Be honest with yourself and the child at the child's own level of understanding. Using euphemisms such as 'they are just sleeping' are often not helpful to the child's development of an understanding of what has happened.
- Continue to listen, even if the same questions are repeated a number of times.
- Do not pretend to believe what you don't believe about what has happened.
- Try to understand the child's feelings as a child of their particular age and reassure them where possible that their reactions are perfectly normal.
- Don't be afraid to say I don't know. You can't be expected to have all the answers.
- Don't be afraid to share your own feelings, even if you get upset. It will help to show that adults also have deep and confusing feelings. Be careful though not to cast the child as your source of 'listening' support, seek this elsewhere.
- Remember there are others who can help you. Find another adult to talk to on a regular basis i.e. a person who can listen and understand. Supporting a child can be upsetting and emotionally very demanding and it is very important to get this personal support.
- Don't be afraid to admit to colleagues, family and managers that you can't cope at any particular time.
- Support can come from:
 - family and friends are the natural supporters
 - colleagues at work (peers and managers)
 - religious and community leaders
 - specialist bereavement support groups
 - psychologists or counsellors
 - medical practitioners
- Children grieve cyclically and for intensely loved ones the process can go on for many years. As children and young adults acquire new ideas they may think again about a death in order to integrate the new ideas into their life story.

Natural Responses to the Loss of Loved Ones

- Where loss of a loved one has occurred, children as well as adults will naturally grieve for those they cared for. Grieving can be expressed in a number of ways:
 - Initial shock and numbness.
 - Disbelief or denial – knowing the person has died but not being able to accept it at a deeper level.
 - Searching for the loved person even though they know they are dead. This searching can take many forms e.g. looking at and talking to photographs, going into rooms where they were in life.
 - Anguish and sadness, sometimes the intensity of this emotion can be frightening and generate a feeling of anger. There is often a need to talk about the loved one at this point.
 - Physical and emotional stress, e.g. loss of appetite, lack of patience, muscular tension etc.
- In younger children these reactions may be less clear but their counterparts and effects can be recognised by those who know them. Seeking the support of familiar adults, reluctance to leave familiar places, excessive quietness and lack of engagement, tearfulness and angry outbursts are not uncommon or unnatural. Many of these reactions are fuelled by a fear of ‘what might also happen’.
- Grieving often, but not always, follows a process that is helpfully described by the Whirlpool of Grief. It is important to realise however that grieving is not a linear process and previously experienced emotions are often revisited, albeit with lesser intensity.



Thinking about where the child or adult might be, and sometimes with older children sharing the Whirlpool, can be helpful.

Talking to Children

- Talking and listening is an important form of support for children. Try to respond by reflecting back what the child is saying, or summarising, rather than trying to move the conversation on as we do in everyday conversation.
- It is not helpful to the child to force a conversation by introducing 'things you think should be talked about', this takes away the child's control of the agenda and may introduce things they are not yet ready to talk about. Listen carefully and stay with the child's agenda.
- Giving information to the child is important and counters confusion and the sense of loss of control over their life. Listening carefully to the child will provide the clues to what, if any, information the child needs.
- Information should be given in concrete, honest, culturally relevant terms, avoiding euphemisms. Be ready for repeat questions from children as this is part of the grief work that will occur.
- Watch for cues that you have 'lost' the child e.g. fidgeting or poor eye contact, and don't force interactions if this occurs.
- Acknowledge the child's emotions and reassure them that the feelings are normal. When the feelings are a little less intense it is useful to introduce the idea that they will feel better in time, though it will be 'up and down'. The Whirlpool of Grief can help here with older children.
- Memories and emotions associated with grieving can be very mixed up, pain, anger and sadness can sit with the pleasure and warmth associated with remembering good times with the deceased. This can be confusing for children and the Three Stones metaphor can be helpful. A jagged angular stone signifies the painful, sharp memories of loss and grief, a smooth rounded stone signifies the memories of the lost person's everyday but personal behaviours, a shiny precious stone the special memories of happy shared times. All 3 stones can be held in the hand at the same time signifying the mixed, complex but normal feelings a child might have.
- With young children, the use of emotion labelling words e.g. sad, angry or scared, can be helpful and used to externalise, acknowledge and support the grieving process.
- Acknowledge children's fears and validate them as difficult to think about and deal with.
- Don't worry about 'saying the wrong thing'. If you use common sense, any 'getting it wrong' just won't be helpful to the child rather than actively harmful.
- As children get older their understanding of death grows and particularly in adolescence this may result in 'philosophical' reflection. Questions may arise like – Why has this happened? What is life and death? Why wasn't it me? These sort of questions are best responded to by listening and responding in ways that support the young person's own thinking whilst not actively shaping it. Responses like – 'That's a really difficult question, you've obviously thought about it, what thoughts have you had so far?' - should open up a helpful conversation. The subsequent use of reflective techniques will allow the young person to begin to explore their thinking in a way that is controlled by them and therefore 'safe' for them.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What should I tell the child if someone has died?

Children should be told as soon as possible to prevent them learning from some other potentially inappropriate source. Try to use a normal tone of voice and clear language and avoid hushed whispers which may convey 'spooky', unnatural feelings.

How should I tell them?

Whenever possible children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where they will feel more secure. Both you and the child may feel uncomfortable and uncertain of yourselves and holding or hugging them will help to reduce some of their fear and insecurity.

What should I tell them?

It is very important to tell the truth as far as you know it. Even 'white lies' will have to be renegotiated later on and the truth is the best counter to rumour and fantasy which may otherwise build up. This information will stay with the child for a very long time and if challenged later may destroy the trust between you and the child if it is incorrect.

Children may not 'take it all in' initially, but will probably want to go over the facts at a later time, asking more questions and gradually assimilating the information. Do not worry about having to keep on giving the same answers.

How much should I explain?

As mentioned above, children will vary in their ability at any time to take in particular explanations. If your information is limited, then tell them what you know and then make every effort to find out more.

In the absence of facts our minds tend to create our own stories or explanations for events. When a bereavement occurs children may begin to believe that what they have done or are doing might be related to the loss. These fears may need to be brought out and talked about later.

In some situations children and adults may well have to accept a long period of continuing uncertainty and children are likely to need to revisit their understanding of a loss a number of times.

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

It is important to let children know that it is natural, and acceptable, to be upset and to cry even for adults. It is better to share feelings rather than to deny them, e.g. crying together.

Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from an extreme adult grief reaction and adults who are prostrate with grief may need some time and space initially to release their most extreme reactions before talking to children.

How can I explain some of the feelings?

You may wish to tell the child that you both may experience some strange and confusing feelings. Sadness and emptiness will predominate, and he/she may also feel guilty about the

feelings of anger, jealousy and resentment which may occur. Point out that this confused mixture of feelings is normal and will eventually subside. Some children like the idea of 'memory stones' and finding 3 suitable small stones that they can keep is useful. A jagged angular stone signifies the painful, sharp memories of loss and grief, a smooth rounded stone signifies the memories of the lost person's everyday but personal behaviours, a shiny precious stone the special memories of happy shared times. All 3 stones can be held in the hand at the same time signifying the mixed, complex but normal feelings a child might have.

How do I talk about what trauma, loss and death means?

The meaning will vary according to the child and family's religious beliefs. However, by listening to the child you might be able to ascertain whether the child has developed unusual or odd ideas about the trauma. This may be the result of older children inadvertently frightening the child, or more likely the child may have picked up some distorted picture from watching TV or reading ghost stories.

Encourage the child to ask questions and tailor your answers to the child's level of understanding, within his/her home religion or culture and your own belief system.

Some children will ask the same questions again and again, but be patient as it is their way of coming to understand the complexity of the situation and is a healthy part of the normal grief reaction.

What if the child sees a ghost?

Children have the ability to recall very strong and 'real' images or memories of people including smells, language etc, and these memories can be labelled ghosts. It is very normal to experience a strong after impression of someone you are close to and it is important to value this experience rather than be frightened by it. These recollections become less strong over time, although they are disconcerting because they arrive at unpredictable times.

What if the child feels that they are too big to cry?

Some children may have been brought up not to show their emotions and maintain a 'stiff upper lip'. Teenagers in particular may suppress grief as they see crying as a babyish emotion which might lead to them 'losing-face' in front of their friends.

These inappropriate coping strategies can only work for a while and often leave some children 'out of synch' with their peers, i.e. appearing in control when all the others are upset and later experiencing grief and guilt when all the others have come to terms with the loss.

It is important that the adults give children permission to grieve as well as the opportunity and support, without trying to force them to behave in a prescribed manner.

In what way are adolescents different from other children?

During their adolescence young people have very confusing feelings about themselves and the world about them. Grief tends to heighten these feelings, increase the confusion and can lead to the onset of depression.

Talking about these feelings with a caring and supportive adult, who is available when required, is a useful approach rather than trying to be 'forcefully helpful'. However, adolescents often orientate more towards their peers and away from their family so do not feel rejected if they look to friends for their support and comfort. Just be available and tell

them so. Art, music and sport may be an effective way of expressing feelings and should be encouraged.

How long does it take to come to terms with the traumas?

It is difficult to be specific as children grieve in different ways and it will depend on the nature of the trauma. Most children will show signs of beginning to come to terms with traumas reasonably quickly. Initial reactions of shock and disbelief usually pass quickly, but children can feel this way for some time. Feelings of anger, physical pain, deep sadness with many features of depression and disorientation are not uncommon, followed by a period of 'up and down' emotions before a degree of acceptance and reorganisation of life emerges. The Whirlpool of Grief at the end of this document can be a helpful way of thinking about the grieving process. It is important to realise however that grieving is not a linear process and previously experienced emotions are often revisited, albeit with lesser intensity before a new kind of normality emerges.

It may be particularly difficult when several children are going through the grieving process as they may well be experiencing different emotions at the same time.

Are some children more vulnerable than others?

Vulnerability varies according to age, developmental level and personal circumstances.

Very young children under 5 years are beginning to develop their independence from the security of the home and loss can be particularly damaging to this process. They may also express their disturbance in indirect ways e.g. bed-wetting, nightmares, phobias etc, and will need significant reassurance and comforting.

Other children who are potentially more vulnerable are those from already insecure backgrounds for example where there are broken families, marital instability, chronically ill relatives etc, and these children may react strongly to a new loss. Children in care may be particularly vulnerable and need higher levels of reassurance and support.

All children can come to terms with their loss and the aim is to provide support and comfort so that the trauma is gradually overcome, rather than their emotions remaining a long term negative effect on their emotional development.

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

There is a temptation to talk about new responsibilities within a family, of the new 'man of the house' or the 'little mother'. This approach may diminish the acceptance and importance of the child's own grief, whereas regression to earlier behaviour, for a short period, may be acceptable and desirable.

It is desirable, however, to talk positively about the absent people and in particular events involving them that have positive associations for the child.

How can I distinguish children who are attention seeking from those who are grieving?

This is the most difficult question to answer and really depends upon your knowledge of the child. It is true that some children, seeing the legitimate care and attention that genuinely upset children are getting, will 'try it on' to gain attention. It is also important to remember that children who are usually attention seeking also need to grieve and be handled sensitively.

It is very important that all children, even those most upset, have boundaries set and know what is expected of them. This will give them the required security and a realisation that 'not all the world has changed', i.e. you might end a teaching session talking about the lost people, but then start the next day a session without a carry over of emotions.

How should I manage the grieving child?

The child needs to be part of a group and not singled out. Children should be expected to work in school along with their peers, although it may be appropriate to inform them that for a while you do not expect the usual standard of performance, as they could get very upset if they fall below par by being distracted.

The other members of a child's peer group can be mutually self-supporting, although you may choose to intervene in a helpful way if they appear to be simply upsetting one another.

Can a school or family religion be helpful?

Schools and family beliefs can be particularly helpful as they can provide explanations, support and, above all, structure for the child.

A particular problem may occur if the child begins to question religious explanations. You may need guidance from a religious advisor if this happens.

What practical things can I do?

There are a number of practical things that children may choose to do. These might include:

- Thinking of ways they can make a memorial or celebrate a person's life e.g. planting a tree, raising money for a relevant charity, releasing helium balloons with a message attached, lighting a candle, creating an award, making a mix of the person's favourite music.
- Creating a personal book or box remembering the person who has died containing photographs, poems, stories, drawings, small personal objects etc.
- Older children making an electronic memory folder with songs, video, photographs etc.
- Younger children making drawings of the way they feel to help them talk about and understand their feelings.
- Sharing stories supporting children's understanding of death and bereavement. Amazon has an excellent range of books and their reviewer's comments can help you to choose the right books for your circumstances. Try, *Badgers Parting Gift* by Susan Varley or *Always and Forever* by Alan Durant, as starting points and follow the 'customers who bought this item' links.
- Sharing activity books such as the *Grief Encounter Workbook* by Shelley Gilbert or *Muddle, Puddles and Sunshine* by Diana Crossley, again try Amazon. Books for older children are far less common, but *When Parents Die: Learning to live with the Loss of a Parent* by Rebecca Abrams may be useful for older teenagers.

If you find it personally difficult to work with the child, talk it over with other people who know the child to see if they can help.

Additional Guidance

The following guidance is also available from the Educational Psychology Team (EPT) or Education Social Work Service (ESWS) and is downloadable from the EPT area or Emergencies area in Bradford Schools Online.

- Critical Incident Guidance for Schools and Settings
- Critical Incident Guidance Individual Bereavement Planning Guide
- Critical Incident Guidance Major Incident Planning
- Children's Understanding of Death
- The Whirlpool of Grief

The web site Winston's Wish is an excellent resource for dealing with children's death and loss.

<http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/>

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