

Supporting children through bereavement and loss

Information sheet for parents and carers

Introduction

Many young people will experience the death of a member of the family, friend or someone close to them. They may attend a school where a significant event has happened and you may find them trying to deal with this loss.

As parents and carers it may be particularly difficult to help your child, especially if the death is someone close to you as well.

We hope to be able to provide a few suggestions to help you understand your child's responses and find ways of helping him or her through the normal stages of grief.

Reactions to bereavement and loss

Children of all ages will experience feelings of grief and may be said to mourn just as adults do, however, your child's understanding of a response to death may vary with age. Children below the age of 7 may not understand the concept of death or its finality. Children aged 7 to 10 years become aware of the finality and permanence of death. By the age of 11 most children have a more adult understanding of death.

How do children grieve?

Grief is a normal essential response to the death of a loved one. It can last for a short while or continue over a period of months or years. Whereas adult grief tends to be ongoing, a child's grief may appear to come and go.

For adults and children grief has several stages.

These are;

- **Shock and disbelief:** a feeling of numbness, apathy, possibly withdrawal.
- **Denial:** refusal to accept a person is dead.
- **Growing awareness:** may be accompanied by surges of intense feeling e.g. guilt, anger, depression, sadness, fear or anxiety.
- **Acceptance:** this may not occur until the second year or later following the death.

How feelings affect behaviour

You may notice some of the following responses. These are normal, provided they do not go on for too long or cause extremes of distress;

- Increased misbehaviour, aggression and more immature behaviour.
- Silence and withdrawn behaviour, reluctance to talk.
- Sleep disturbance including bad dreams, fear of being alone or in the dark.
- Excessive cleaning.
- Wanting to sleep with parents or carers.
- Changes in appetite.
- Fears for their own safety or that of family and friends.
- Being easily upset by every day events.
- Difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, toileting accidents.
- Unwillingness to go to school or to go out with friends.

How to help

You may be grieving for that person too, but the following should help your child;

- Try not to hide your own feelings from your child. It can even be helpful for your child to see you are upset, rather than pretending everything is normal. Explain in simple terms that everyone gets upset by death.
- Try to allow your child opportunities to talk about feelings and about the person who died. Let them know it's okay for them to cry, how ever old they are.
- Be ready to listen, but don't expect your child to be ready to talk. Hugs, sharing activities and giving your child time will provide reassurance.
- Acknowledge feelings which may include anger and guilt as well as sorrow. If your child says it is his/her fault that someone has died, be prepared to discuss this and resist phrases such as 'you'll soon feel better'.
- Try to answer questions as honestly and accurately as you can in words your child will understand. If possible, use the words 'death' and 'died'. Phrases such as 'passed away' or 'gone away' can be confusing.
- Keep in touch with your child's school so you can share information about how they are coping.
- Maintain routines such as bedtimes, meals or going to normal activities such as extra-curricular clubs. These all help provide a sense of security.
- Expect your child to go to school. Familiar situations and maintaining friendships are important.
- It may be helpful for a few of your child's friends to be told and given some guidance about how they can help.
- Attending the funeral or cremation may be an important part of the grieving process, especially if the rest of the family are going. You know your child best so do consider whether he or she would be helped by being there and how he or she might feel later on if they had not been there. Discuss this with your child and help them to understand what will happen at the funeral so you can reach a decision together.
- If your child's responses are intense, persist over a long period of time, or prevent your child returning to a normal way of life, then you may need to seek extra help.

Looking after yourself

There are no easy answers. Talking about and coping with death are some of the most difficult things we ever have to do. Caring for a bereaved child can be especially distressing, so do remember to take the time to talk to your family and friends about your own feelings.

Further support

The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) at your child's school or your local GP may be able to help.

Additionally, Penhaligon's Friends are a Cornwall based charity who support bereaved children, young people, parents and carers throughout the county and can offer telephone support and guidance.

Tel: **01209 210624**

www.penhaligonsfriends.org.uk

