

## Talking about death with children and young people

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As a society we are often uncomfortable when talking about death, dying and bereavement. This becomes ever more apparent when it comes to talking to children and young people about such matters, with more than half of college students recalling a lack of communication from parents about their first bereavement experience and many unanswered questions at the time (Knight et al., 2000). The desire to protect young children from pain and distress is understandable, especially when that pain involves dealing with the death of a close family member or friend. Certainly in the past it was believed that children were too young to understand or mourn death and some of these misconceptions continue today (Pettle & Britten, 1995). This conceptualisation of children may mean that many people are unable or unsure how to talk openly or appropriately about death in front of young children, or to express their own grief.

However, nowadays it tends to be much better understood that all bereaved children can experience loss and grief, with a basic understanding of death and therefore the ability to mourn, beginning to emerge around age three (Worden, 1996). Even infants are aware of separation and can be deeply affected by the loss of a key caregiver, especially by the family disruption and instability that so frequently accompanies death (Adams, 2011). And even if the child is too young to understand an important death at the time, that same child will often revisit their grief throughout key developmental stages, and will need to reinterpret and assimilate the death in light of their new knowledge, understandings and experiences about life (Biank & Werner-Lin, 2011). Furthermore, bereavement is a universal experience. Almost all children will experience a significant loss by the time that they leave school, and even those that are fortunate enough to escape such an experience will most likely be affected by the grief of a friend or fellow school-pupil.

Talking to children in an age-appropriate way about death is therefore hugely important, not just to support a young person through their own bereavement experiences, but to help equip all young people (not just the bereaved) with some of the skills needed to navigate life's challenging events. Not talking rarely protects children, in fact restricted communication about death can leave children and young people with gaps in their knowledge that are often filled by imagined scenarios which can be worse than the reality (Worden, 1996). As a result children can feel even more confused, anxious or isolated in their grief. A study of young men in HMYOI Polmont who had experienced loss and bereavement in childhood (Vaswani et al., 2016) found that many had reached their late teenage years without ever talking about their losses, without understanding their own emotions in the context of a normal grief response and therefore not seeking or receiving the help that they needed: "I didn't even know what grieving was". Conversely, open communication is associated with better adjustment to loss and death (Hooghe & Neimeyer, 2013).

### Who should talk to children and young people about death?

Death is an inevitable part of life and so the short answer is that 'everyone' should talk to children and young people about death. Parents are often the main source of information, especially for younger children. Whether it is using a natural opportunity such as the discovery of a dead animal to simply have a general discussion about life and death, preparing a child for the death of a family member, or breaking the news of an unexpected death, parents can provide a safe and trusted relationship from which to explore these difficult issues.

However, at times young people may require some form of support from outside of the immediate family. Sometimes a parent will be too affected by grief to be able to provide the consistent caregiving and information that a bereaved child needs. Some young people have also indicated

that they like to have access to external support so that they can share their true worries and emotions without fear of upsetting a grieving parent any further (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). Thankfully, young people are remarkably resilient and most will not require specialist provision but simply a listening ear, empathy and comfort. This type of support could come from a member of the extended family, or from a professional with whom they already have a positive relationship.

Schools are in an important place to offer bereavement support, as they have an established connection and relationship with a great number of young people. School can offer sanctuary from the pain and chaos of family grief, and can provide much needed routine and consistency (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008). Furthermore, demonstrating understanding about the normal short-term impact of grief on the ability to concentrate, behaviour, and school performance and providing practical solutions at this time can help young people remain engaged and achieving academically. Yet it could be argued that the most important role that schools could play is in sensitively and appropriately educating all young people about death, loss and bereavement as part of the school curriculum (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005).

As children grow and develop they increasingly turn to their friends and peers for support and advice, hence the importance of ensuring that bereaved and non-bereaved children alike are furnished with a basic understanding of death, bereavement and grief, and on an ongoing basis to match their developmental stage. Peer support is also often appreciated by young people and can help create a sense of normativeness and reduce isolation among bereaved young people (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008).

### Considerations when talking to children and young people about death

If bereavement is not seen solely as a 'specialist' issue this means that a wide range of people need to be equipped with the confidence and skills to talk about death, and have an awareness of what services are available should further support be needed, as well as their own supports to lean on when helping a young person through a difficult time. Although expertise is not required, some preparation is necessary and consideration should be given to a number of factors, which are summarised below. Potential sources of additional or external support for the young person should also be identified in case these are required.

**Age and stage of development:** Although a child of any age can experience loss, the way that they understand and respond to loss varies according to their developmental stage. The use of direct, but age-appropriate language is important, as even using common euphemisms such as 'Granny has gone to sleep' can cause children unnecessary anxiety about sleep and bedtime. Similarly, while all communication needs to be up-front and honest, the amount of information shared may need to be tailored, particularly in the case of traumatic deaths. Both language and facts should be revisited regularly as the child develops.

**Safe spaces:** Conversations about death need to happen in a safe space, both literally and figuratively. These conversations need to happen in private, where interruptions are unlikely, and within the context of a trusted and supportive relationship where care and comfort can be provided. **Timing and persistence:** Support should be offered, and not have to be requested. Even if this offer of help is initially rejected young people themselves state that this support should continue to be offered at regular but respectful intervals, as often young people may not recognise the need for, or be ready for, help, yet find it difficult to ask for help when it is wanted.

**Self-care.** The person supporting a young person through bereavement and loss may also be grieving themselves, or will bring with them their own personal experiences of loss and grief. Even just listening to young people's stories of loss and grief can be an emotive experience. While a shared understanding and empathy will help build a supportive relationship with the young person, the helper should also ensure that they have access to any necessary supports or coping strategies that they themselves need.

### Useful Resources

[www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/bereaved-children/](http://www.sad.scot.nhs.uk/bereavement/bereaved-children/)

[www.crusescotland.org.uk/](http://www.crusescotland.org.uk/)

[www.childbereavementuk.org/files/5614/0117/9770/Explaining\\_to\\_young\\_children\\_that\\_someone\\_has\\_died.pdf](http://www.childbereavementuk.org/files/5614/0117/9770/Explaining_to_young_children_that_someone_has_died.pdf)

[www.barnardos.org.uk/child\\_bereavement\\_booklet\\_explaining\\_death.pdf](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/child_bereavement_booklet_explaining_death.pdf)

[www.winstonswish.org.uk/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/)

[http://support.childbereavement.org.uk/information\\_support/other\\_support\\_organisations](http://support.childbereavement.org.uk/information_support/other_support_organisations)