Guidance for Adults Supporting Children and Young People Who Have Been Bereaved During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Peterborough Educational Psychology Service**

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**Loss and Bereavement**

# Loss and bereavement are universal experiences. Bereavement can be defined as ‘the loss of something precious to us’, this can include people, places or even special items or objects (Ward, 1989). During the Covid-19 pandemic, bereavement is experienced in many different ways, including the death of loved ones, or the loss of close relationships during social distancing measures. It is important to recognise loss and bereavement to help us move forward from the experience. (Ward,1989)

Grief is a universal human reaction to the loss of something precious to us; children will also experience these feelings. Although some models of grief traditionally describe a linear process (e.g. “The Stages of Grief Model”) we now understand grief is more complex. Grief causes many different emotions which can fluctuate over time. Sometimes, grief can also be delayed until well after the event.

# **Children and Bereavement**

Research suggests that individual differences between children and young people means that often they will react to sad or tragic events in an individual way. Those who support children and young people through bereavement and loss therefore need to be aware of differences in:

* Gender
* Age and developmental stage
* Receptive and expressive language
* Emotional literacy and confidence
* Family dynamics, security and structure
* Religion and faith
* Prior experiences

It’s important to acknowledge that the impact of bereavement and loss on children and young people will depend on its context and its consequences. We should be careful about making simple assumptions as to the impact of a bereavement based on our own beliefs.

**Grieving and Isolation**

Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Advice is usually to avoid isolating yourself, but we are in a situation where this is required of many of us.

This can make feelings of loneliness and grief more intense. A bereaved family might be isolated together, and although this may be a support at times, at other times tensions and resentments may be magnified. If children and young people are isolated it may be difficult to keep them occupied whilst adults deal with their own emotions and fears. The impact of dealing with a bereavement, compounded with feelings of worry about external situations, can mean that feelings of grief aren’t fully expressed.

At times like this when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, people can find themselves distracted from dealing with their grief. The person who died may have been a partner, parent or carer, and the bereaved person may be left without practical or emotional support at a time they need it most. Friends and relatives who might otherwise have been able to provide practical support (such as help with meals or shopping) may be unavailable or preoccupied with their own family’s situation.

These children may need additional consideration once they return to school, as they may not have had the opportunity to fully process their grief, despite it being some time since the event.

# **How to Support a Child or Young Person with a Bereavement**

It is important to know most people who experience a bereavement do not require specialist counselling. There is also no fixed ‘timeline’ for when feelings of grief will end, it is an individual process. When supporting children and young people with bereavement, it is best provided by a trusted, familiar adult, as and when it is needed.

When talking to children, the following strategies may be helpful:

* Let them know you are sorry for their loss and you would like to help them.
* Give the information a bit at a time, allowing them the opportunity to ask questions. Don’t feel pressured to discuss everything in one conversation. Older children will want to, and be able to, handle more information.
* Pictures and story books may help younger children or those with SEND to understand their feelings of grief - the Peterborough Local Offer has some suggested resources which can be accessed via: <https://fis.peterborough.gov.uk/kb5/peterborough/directory/site.page?id=3-CrEQhcFdY>
* Children who have experienced a bereavement may want to spend some time remembering their loved one in various ways. The following document contains ideas for children / young people to remember a loved one suitable for ages 3-18: <http://hawaiisca.org/wp-content/uploads/Grief-Activities-2014.pdf>. Further resources to support individual children are included in the reference list below.
* Children may have lots of questions. Answer their questions honestly and simply, with factual language relevant to their age and understanding.
* Acknowledge that this situation is difficult, and their feelings are a part of that, and that’s ok. The situation cannot be changed, but you can help them manage their feelings. As adults, our job is to listen and acknowledge children’s worries to support them to manage their emotions.
* Children may experience guilt or worry that they have caused the bereavement in some way (especially in younger children). Emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen.
* Give them opportunities to spend time with you taking part in activities and games they enjoy, giving them space to talk to you if they wish.
* Reassure them that they are safe.
* Children may experience short-term behavioural changes, which may be surprising at first. Avoid taking these responses personally. Help them to understand the relationship between their behaviour and their feelings. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings (drawing, taking exercise or talking).
* Advise on, and monitor, their social media usage.

# **Reintegration of a bereaved child or young person into school**

Talk to the family and child / young person, if age appropriate, to see how they would like to discuss their bereavement and what they would like to see happen when they return to school. Adapt your strategies accordingly to the wishes of the family and child / young person. Some strategies and ideas you may wish to use are:

* When they return, acknowledge their loss: ‘I’m sorry that (name of deceased) died. I know that you are sad. It is OK to cry’.
* Talk to the child and young person’s current peers attending school about how people are affected by grief and encourage them to share their own feelings.
  + Ask about how they have coped with bereavement in their own lives and what has helped.
  + Discuss with classmates how it may feel for the bereaved child / young person to come back to school. Ask how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after a death. Highlight that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated; some people may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general bereaved children and young people say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being ‘overly-nice’ to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don’t want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all.
  + It may be appropriate for classmates to create cards, letters of support or similar mementos for the bereaved, to be sent to the family or to be given on return to school.
* Allow the child / young person access to a ‘quiet room’ where he/she can go to be alone. Agree a way to communicate this (e.g. signal or exit card).

# **Looking after yourself**

It is important to acknowledge how emotionally demanding supporting bereaved children and young people can be. To support others you need to ensure that you are looking after yourself and your own emotional wellbeing. Conversations about illness and death are emotionally hard work and will often expose us to the heightened emotions and worries of others and to our own experiences and feelings about loss.

If you are supporting a young person who has been bereaved:

* Talk to your line manager about what you are expected to undertake and share if you do not feel able to provide this type of support at this time.
* Take time before conversations to prepare and afterwards to reflect and allow yourself some space/time to engage in something unrelated. Try to maintain a good work/life balance.
* Seek social/peer support, in addition to managerial support.
* Remember that there is no “blueprint” for offering support. You are doing your best and your support will be appreciated.

# **Local support**

**NHS Bereavement Support Peterborough and Cambridgeshire**

Local services directory for bereavement support across Peterborough and Cambridgeshire.

<https://www.cambridgeshireandpeterboroughccg.nhs.uk/news-and-events/leaflets-and-guides/bereavement-support/>

**Cruse Bereavement Support Peterborough**

Local chapter of the nationwide charity; holds fundraisers and events.

[peterborough@cruse.org.uk](mailto:peterborough@cruse.org.uk)

Tel: 01733 348439

**CHUMS**

Mental Health and wellbeing service, to support children and young people up to the age of 18 with significant emotional wellbeing difficulties, which may arise from bereavement.

<http://chums.uk.com/cambs-pborough-services/>

Tel: 0330 0581 657

# **Useful websites**

**Cruse Bereavement Care**

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

**Child Bereavement Trust**

[www.childbereavement.org](http://www.childbereavement.org/)

**Samaritans**

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/support-and-information/worried-about-someone-else/if-youre-worried-about-someone-else-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>

**Winston’s Wish**

<https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people/>, <https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/> and <https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus-funerals-alternative-goodbyes/>

**Books and resources**

#### **Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine**

#### Diana Crossley and Kate Sheppard

A book created by the charity Winston’s Wish, which gently guides children through the grieving process. This book features activities to complete and, over time, builds up a keepsake of their loved one.

ISBN: 1869890582

**When Sadness Comes to Call**

*Eva Eland*

A book which explores the feeling of sadness in an accepting and uplifting way.

ISBN: 1783447184

#### **“Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?” And “What happened to Daddy’s Body?”**

#### Elke and Alex Barber

These two books follow a young boy through the sudden death of his father. A strength of these books is the clear, simple language. The books are quite practical, but at the same time the story is warm and comforting.

ISBN: 178592107X & 1785921061

#### **The Fix-it Man**

#### Dimity Powell and Nicky Johnston

A story which follows a young girl following the death of her mother after a terminal illness. This book acknowledges the impact loss can have on the adults around the child, with an overall message of hope. Children who have experienced loss may relate to this story, and it helps to normalise experiences and emotions.

ISBN: 1925335348

#### **Michael Rosen’s Sad Book**

#### Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake

While this is a picture book, it may be a useful resource for older children. It is a starkly honest account of the author’s own grief following the loss of his son. The book normalises the lasting effects of bereavement.

ISBN: 9781406317848

#### **Badger’s Parting Gifts**

#### Susan Varley

A classic book which aims to help young children process grief. This story uses animals and metaphors to discuss the death of badger, and follows the friends who miss him. Features a helpful reading guide from **Child Bereavement UK** that provides tips for reading *Badger’s Parting Gifts* with children and helping them better understand grief.

ISBN: 1849395144

This guidance has been written by Educational Psychologists working for Peterborough City Council. Please contact Peterborough City Council’s SEND Service (details at <https://fis.peterborough.gov.uk/kb5/peterborough/directory/localoffer.page?familychannel=8>) for further support and information.

We are grateful to Cambridgeshire Educational Psychology Team and West Sussex Educational Psychology Service for sharing their bereavement resources.