



Cruise
Bereavement
Care

Supporting Children Through Grief



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Supporting Children Through Grief

Experiencing the death of someone you love is like being parachuted into a strange land where you have no map and don't know the language. Navigating your own way – let alone helping a child find a way – through this land of pain and loss is very hard work.

Surviving this experience is something you and the children you care for will carry with you into the rest of your lives. Even if you are feeling crushed by your own grief, you are one of the best resources your child has.

Bereaved children need acknowledgement, understanding and holding, both physically and emotionally. Whatever role you may play in a bereaved child's life, you can help him/her to express and share their sorrow by your support, encouragement and practical help.

This booklet may be used as a road map through a child's grief, designed to help you understand some of the ways children respond and how you may be able to help them.

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Children's Grief

Children experience similar feelings to adults following the death of a loved one. However, they often express their feelings differently, depending on their developmental age:

Age	Concept of Death	Possible Reactions
0-2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No concept of death, separation or despair	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May search repeatedly for the deceased• Become clingy and afraid of strangers• Feeding & sleeping difficulties
2-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death seen as reversible• May feel they have caused the death• Magical thinking – make up fantasies to fill gaps in knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fears abandonment and separation• Loud protest• Despair• Indignant at changes in patterns or routine• Sleep problems• May revert to "baby" behaviours
5-11	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More exposure to death and understanding of death as permanent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression• Anger, guilt, temper tantrums, nightmares• Behaviour, learning or school problems.• Perfect child, brave & in control• May become preoccupied with death
Adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death permanent• Denial – it can't happen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Withdrawal, sadness, depression, loneliness• Anger, rejection• Joking, sarcasm• Dependence or regressing to younger age• Insecurity, low self-esteem

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is important to allow children to grieve in their own way and their own time. They may seesaw in and out of grief, needing time to play and have fun as well as to cry.

What bereaved children need

Children and young people themselves have told us what they need when it comes to bereavement care:

- **Answer my questions** – simply, sensitively and factually. Be specific, using words like “dead” or “death” rather than “gone to a better place”. It can help to first ask about the child’s understanding of what happened in order to address misunderstandings.
- **Help me understand** that the dead person can never come back. Explain clearly the cause of death and ensure the child knows the death was not his/her fault. Sometimes you may need to answer the same questions repeatedly; this is the child’s way of checking that the facts have not changed.
- **Give me the opportunity to take part** in the mourning process, to be involved in the funeral and take part in other rituals associated with death. Telling children what to expect and explaining what happens at a funeral will help them to decide whether or not they want to attend.
- **Give me extra reassurance and affection**, so I know I am still loved even in the midst of all the sadness and loss. Children need to know that someone will continue to care for them and be there to meet basic physical and emotional needs. Keeping routines and consistency at home and school can help a child feel more secure.
- **The chance to be quiet and alone** from time to time.

- ***The opportunity to talk at my own pace***, in my own time. The chance to express feelings openly, and to be reassured that these feelings are common to bereaved people.
- ***Ways to help me remember the person*** who has died. Opportunities to play and draw will help to reveal a child's inner world. Children can create a memory book or box with photos and special mementoes of the dead person. (See Resources section for more ideas).
- ***Help me get back to school***. Inform the school about the loss and invite your child to help decide who and how others are told about the situation. Find out who the child can talk to in school if they need some extra help.
- ***The knowledge that there are caring adults*** whom I can trust and spend time with. Extended family, neighbours or teachers can be a resource and a listening ear.
- ***Offer me the opportunity to speak to someone outside the family group***. Often children try to protect parents and other family members from further sadness by hiding their own grief, and it is helpful for them to have a safe place to face and begin dealing with their grief.

"The service Cruse provided for my daughter was very helpful. It gave her an opportunity to talk about her feelings in a safe environment."

"To 'companion' bereaved children means to be an active participant in their healing... You allow yourself to learn from their experiences. You make the commitment to walk with them as they journey through grief."

Alan Wolfelt (1996)

How Can I Help My Child?

If you are bereaved too, the first thing you can do for your child is to **look after yourself**. It can be very painful to manage both your own feelings and your child's. Sometimes it's just impossible.

Find other resources for yourself and your child. Don't try to carry it all on your own. Get away from the family from time to time and give yourself a break; it will help you to cope better when you are with them.

Most of all, **children need clear, direct information** so that they can begin to face the reality of death and cope with their pain and loss. Perhaps you want to protect your child, or feel it is better if they don't know the truth. But children are quick to notice when things are not right; silence will only bewilder and frighten them.

It is important for children to feel that you are strong enough to bear whatever they wish to talk about and to answer their questions.

DO

- Be honest in your explanations and in showing your own grief. This gives your child permission to do so.
- Give plenty of reassurance and affection. Let them know you love them and will be there for them.
- Keep routines and patterns as much as possible.
- Look after yourself
- Be aware that changes such as clinging or aggressive behaviour or physical problems may be an expression of grief.
- Take time to listen and answer questions; let them know their feelings are important.
- Help them remember the person who died.
- Take things one day at a time.

DON'T

- Try to hide your own pain. It is alright to cry in front of your child, though try not to overwhelm them.
- Tell your child not to worry or be sad. They cannot control their feelings.
- Feel like you have to have all the answers or get it right all the time.
- Be surprised at a child's ability to set the grief aside and alternate between sadness and happiness, tears and play. Play enables children to express themselves and release anxiety about events over which they have no control.

www.cruse.org.uk

How Cruse Can Help

- **Someone for adults to talk to** – the opportunity to talk in confidence about your own needs with a trained bereavement volunteer.
- **Advice, support and informational literature** for parents and carers seeking to support bereaved children and young people.
- **Face-to-face bereavement support for children** aged 4-18, available in many Cruse NI branches.

These services can be accessed through the Cruse Regional office (see contact details below), or through your local Cruse branch.

Resources for Supporting Young People

CRUSE BEREAVEMENT CARE

www.cruse.org.uk

Day-by-Day Helpline:
0844 477 9400

Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk

ON-LINE CRUSE HELP FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

www.rd4u.org.uk

(Designed by young people for young people.)

private@rd4u.org.uk

(Personal e-mails from young people answered by trained and supervised young people.)

Day-by-Day Youth Helpline:
0808 808 1677

BARNARDO'S PARENT'S ADVICE LINE

(028) 9064 5899

[www.barnardos.org.uk/
childbereavementservice](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice)

WINSTON'S WISH

www.winstonswish.org.uk

(Children's Books & Activity Sheets Available)

Helpline: 0845 203 0405

CHILDHOOD BEREAVEMENT NETWORK

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

SUDDEN DEATH INFORMATION

[www.royalhospitals.org/
traumaticgrief](http://www.royalhospitals.org/traumaticgrief)

PARENT'S SUPPORT HELPLINE

www.parentlineplus.org.uk

0808 800 2222

CONTACT YOUTH

www.contactyouth.org

(028) 9045 7848

Helpline: 0808 808 8000

To receive this booklet in alternative formats, ring (028) 9079 2419

Book List

Many of these books are available through Cruse Bereavement Care, based in London. See Cruse website for details.

FOR CHILDREN

- *Waterbugs and Dragonflies*: Doris Stricknew, 1984. www.continuumbooks.com
- *What on Earth do you do When Someone Dies?:* Trevor Romain, 1999. Free Spirit Publishing (www.freespirit.com)
- *Charlotte's Web*: E.B. White, 1983. Puffin Modern Classics.
- *I'll Always Love You*: Hans Wilhelm, 1985. Hodder and Stoughton
- *Gentle Willow*: Joyce C. Mills, PhD, 1993. Magination Press, supplied by Being Yourself, Kent: 0304-381333
- *Remembering Grandad*: Sheila and Kate Isherwood, 1994. Oxford University Press
- *The Goodbye Boat*: Mary Joslin Lion, 1998. ISBN 0 7459 3693 8

FOR TEENAGERS

- *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers*: Earl Grollman. Beacon Press
- *My Mother Died and My Father Died*: Susan Wallbank, 1998. Cruse Bereavement Care.
- *When Someone Dies: Help for Young People Coping with Grief*: Dwaine Steffes, 1997. Cruse Bereavement Care.
- *The Charlie Barber Treatment*: Carole Lloyd, 1997. Walker Press.
- *I Never Told Her I loved Her*: Sandra Chick, 1989. Women's Press

FOR ADULTS

- *Caring for Bereaved Children*: Mary Bending, 1993. Cruse Bereavement Care.
- *Grief and Bereavement: Understanding Children*: Ann Couldrick, 1989. Sobell Publications.