

When a Child is Bereaved

Written for the Irish Hospice Foundation by Ros McCarthy, Senior Social Worker, Barnardos Child Bereavement Service.

“I knew my Mam wasn’t well; she’s been in hospital for the last two weeks. They said she might die someday but I didn’t believe it – she’s my Mam.”

(Catherine, age 12)

The death of a parent or sibling is a very painful experience for children. How children grieve will depend on the following factors:

Child’s age/stage of development

Pre-schoolers often think death is reversible. Middle school children begin to realise that death happens to everyone but may worry that the dead person can still feel or think. Adolescents of course are aware that death is an inevitable part of life.

The family’s way of grieving

Because grief is a family affair, children are influenced by how others are grieving in the family. Some families talk openly and show emotions. Others think this is unwise or don’t feel able to grieve in front of the child.

Relationship with the deceased

How important was this person in the child’s life? Is there someone to take over the role that person played in his or her life?

The child’s own temperament

The child’s temperament will affect how they experience the death. Anxious or withdrawn children may find it more difficult to cope with a death than a child who is outgoing and talkative, for example.

Cause of death

In a prolonged or terminal illness, family disruption, distress and hope for remission may have become part of everyday life. While in the case of a sudden death, the child cannot be prepared for what lies ahead. Both types of death bring their own difficulties for children.

When a death occurs

- Let the child know immediately. Talk about what is happening simply and truthfully.
- Use words like “dead” and “dying”. Avoid phrases like “gone away”, “gone to sleep” which can confuse and scare children.
- Children ask questions repeatedly as a means of understanding what has happened. You may need to patiently repeat what you have told them many times.
- Go from known to unknown e.g. “Do you remember when Dad dropped you to school this morning; well, after that...”

- With young children you may need to give a concrete explanation of what “dead” means. For example; *when someone dies they stop breathing. They don’t think or feel anything and they have no more pain.*
- Explain to the child for what will happen next – viewing the body, attending the funeral etc. Try to give them a choice about whether they will attend and assign an adult to take care of them. All children, including very young children or those with a disability, can benefit from being part of the family’s activities in the period following the bereavement.

Common reactions to bereavement

- Feeling guilty- Children may believe that they are somehow responsible for the death.
- Physical pains and aches sometimes similar to those experienced by the deceased are common.
- Sad, repetitive play with toy ambulances, dolls, burying in sand, dark paintings. For older children, the theme of death may be seen in school essays, choice of songs.
- Aggressive destructive play.
- Nightmares, fear of the dark.
- Separation anxiety, possibly refusal to go to school.
- Bedwetting, thumb sucking, poor concentration.

How to help

- Acknowledge anniversaries, birthdays etc. and include the child in planning for these.
- If appropriate, allow the child to choose a personal keepsake.
- Encourage the child to talk to you about their sadness, fears and worries.
- Share memories of the deceased, both happy and sad.
- Reassure the child that it is common to experience a lot of strange and unfamiliar feelings after a death.
- Try to keep a predictable routine and encourage the child to keep up with their friends.
- Reassure them about your own health status but also talk to them about who would take care of them if you got very sick.
- Enlist the support of family and friends and particularly teachers. Talk to your G.P. if your child’s behaviour is causing you concern.

Further reading

4-7-years

When Uncle Bob Died

Althea, Dinosaur Publications, UK, 1982

Gentle Willow: A story for children about dying

Mills, Joyce, C., Magination Press, New York, 1993

Remembering Mum

Perkins, Ginny, Morris, Lean, AC Black Ltd., UK, 1991

7-12 years

Mama's Going To Buy You A Mockingbird

Little, Jean, Puffin Books, Canada, 1985

On The Wings Of A Butterfly: A story about life and death

Maple, Marilyn, Parenting Press Inc., Seattle, 1992

Am I Still A Sister?

Sims, Alicia M., Big A & Co., USA, 1992

Badger's Parting Gifts

Varley, Susan, Picture Lions, UK, 1992

Teenagers

Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers

Grollman, Earl

Beacon press, USA, 1993

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