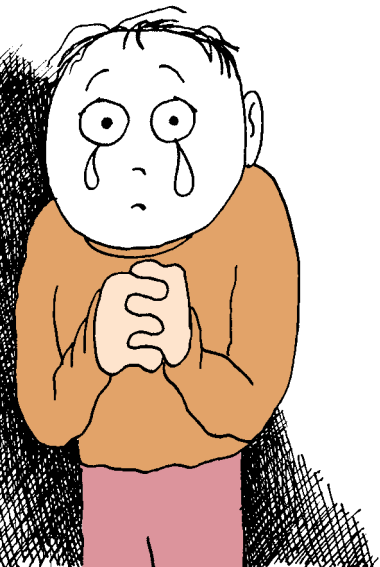
How to explain death to children and young people and help them cope!

Believe in children

Barnardo's
Northern Ireland



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Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service

Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service was established in June 1998.

The service provides:

- An Advice Line which any adult who is concerned about a bereaved child can contact for information and advice.
- Training and information for parents/carers and professionals to assist in developing methods of helping bereaved children.
- Individual and group support to children and young people up to the age of 18 who have been bereaved.

Advice line No. 028 9066 8333

Helping children at the time of a death

Children experience similar feelings to adults following the death of a significant person in their lives. These include shock, denial, anger, guilt, sadness and fear. However, they often express their feelings differently from adults. Children will often see-saw in and out of grief and demonstrate a range of emotions following a death which may include excitement, anger and sadness.

Children are not born with an automatic understanding of death, i.e. that it is universal, irreversible and has a cause. Adults need to help them understand these concepts and this is best done by giving the child clear, honest information on a frequent basis. At times, children can appear very accepting of a bereavement while, later, they may become very distressed. This can be confusing for adults and it is important that children are given the opportunity to display their feelings of grief in their own time.

Explaining a death to a child can be a difficult and painful task, but it is our belief and experience that a concerned adult can help a child manage their feelings of pain and loss.
When explaining a death to a child it is important to consider the following;

- Try to use the word "death" or "dead" rather than phrases such as "gone to sleep", "lost" or "gone to a better place". These phrases cause confusion for young children and can lead to unnecessary anxiety.

  "*My mum told me that my granda died in his sleep. I am scared to go to sleep in case I die, and I feel I have to keep checking my parents during the night in case they have died,*"
  Cara, aged 8.

- Young children need to be told repeatedly that when someone dies they can never come back. It is important to explain that the dead person doesn't eat, sleep, or feel any pain.

  "Will my mummy come back for my birthday?" ***Steven, aged 6***.

- Children benefit from having the cause of the death explained to them. This should be done simply and in a language that the child understands. There is a risk that if children are not given a clear explanation, they may blame themselves.

  "My mummy told me to stop running up and down in the hospital when my nanny was sick. She said I was too noisy and it hurt nanny. Nanny died, it's my fault." ***Angela, aged 5****.*

- It is important that a child understands that everyone dies at some time, but most people don't die until they are older. Following a death, children, can become very anxious and often have difficulty separating from family members. It helps them to regain confidence in the world if they can understand the concepts of death.

  "I am scared everyone in my family is going to die now and so I don't like playing with my friends or being away from home." ***Michael, aged 9****.*

Children should be given the choice of attending the funeral – again with a trusted adult who can answer any questions and be supportive. In some situations, this may be an aunt, uncle or someone who is not in the immediate family who can answer the child's questions whilst the funeral is in progress.

> *"All my daddy's friends shook my hand at the funeral, I felt that I had to be the man of the family."*
> ***Jack, aged 9**.*

Children's understanding of death

Children's understanding of death will depend largely upon their developmental stage. The following guide is based on chronological ages and is a guide only, remembering that each child is unique.

0-2 Years
Children experience feelings of pain and loss. They will protest loudly and may search repeatedly for the deceased. They need a consistent routine, cuddles and hugs and they need to be told repeatedly that the person will not be returning. It is important that special memories and photographs are kept for the children as they grow older.

2-5 Years
Children at this stage think 'literally' so use of language is extremely important.

Statements such as, "gone for a long sleep" and "we've lost him/her" can often cause confusion. They still do not understand the irreversibility of death and need to be told repeatedly that the dead cannot come back.

At this age, children may believe that their actions can impact on the world around them and that, in some ways, they may have caused the death.

They need to be told that people die for a variety of reasons, but not because of anything we say.

Children at this age will often act out through play what is happening around them. They need their questions answered openly, honestly and simply. It is also important to maintain consistent routine.

5-8 Years
Children can usually understand that death is irreversible and universal. They will ask frequent questions about death and may become pre-occupied with thoughts of death. They may sometimes feel responsible for the surviving members and they need to be allowed to be children, not overwhelmed with adult responsibilities.

It helps if the child can explore feelings of guilt and responsibility and that their questions are answered openly and honestly. It is important that they get support at school, as often children who are bereaved feel different. They often experience bullying at school because of this. They may have temper tantrums, sleep disturbance, nightmares, and also may act younger than their age.

8-12 Years
At this stage children usually understand that death is irreversible, universal and has a cause. Communication can become difficult and grief can be expressed in terms of physical aches and pains or challenging behaviour.

They need the opportunity to talk to a trusted adult. They need reassurance about changes in lifestyle e.g. the money situation and whether they can remain in their house. Also they need support at school in dealing with peer groups and they may be more vulnerable to bullying.

13-18 Years
Teenagers are particularly vulnerable as at this stage they try to solve problems themselves and find it difficult to seek help and support from adults.

They understand the concept of death, but do not have the emotional maturity to deal with it. It is normal for adolescents to have difficulty talking to their parents, but they need the opportunity to talk to trusted adults or peers. School can provide security and routine, however, it can also be a place where they feel isolated, different and have difficulties with school work. They may feel overwhelmed by exams and coursework.

Adolescents need choice with regard to the funeral and subsequent life changes. At the same time they should not be burdened with adult responsibilities, e.g. "Be strong for your mother" or "You're the man of the house now."

Traumatic death

Children and young people can experience trauma when they are involved in an incident when someone dies, such as a road traffic accident. At other times children may display signs of trauma when they find a body. In such incidents it is important that children and young people receive specialist help in dealing with the symptoms of trauma.

Northern Ireland has a number of specialist Trauma Centres and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Specialists, who provide this service. The Child Bereavement Service focuses on helping children and young people deal with feelings of loss following a bereavement.

Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service contact details

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Contact Tel No: 028 9066 8333

www.barnardos.org.uk/
childbereavementservice

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