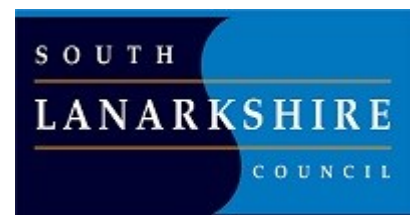


Helping children and young people through bereavement and loss

A guide for parents and carers

The
Psychological
Service



EDUCATION RESOURCES

“Grief is a process, not a state”

(Anne Grant 1755-1838)

Definition of bereavement and loss

Bereavement is a type of loss, when someone close to you dies. Other types of loss such as family separation or divorce, death of a pet, loss of a limb, loss of job or home etc. can also affect children in similar ways.

The signs of grieving in children and young people

- **Thinking**

Difficulty in concentration, absentmindedness, impaired reasoning, decline in academic performance, confusion over events surrounding the death or loss

- **Psychological**

Obsessive behaviours, loss of attention skills, personality change, increased dreams or nightmares, fear of recurrence of the event, excessive concern for others, fear of losing other loved ones

- **Emotional**

The need to be looked after – dressing, washing, regression to an earlier developmental stage, anxiety, anger, guilt, disbelief, euphoria

- **Behavioural**

Sudden changes in behaviour, clinging, reappearance of childish habits as above, obsessive or repetitive talking, decline in self discipline, lessening of sense of responsibility, avoidance of others, including school refusal.

- **Physical**

Headaches, shock, shivering, loss of appetite, loss of physical control, disturbed sleep, unexplained pain e.g. in limbs, stomach etc.

- **Practical**

Inability to cope with regular routine, forgetting/losing things

It is important to stress that this list is not exhaustive. All of the above are normal reactions and should eventually pass but if they go on for a long time, please consult the helping agencies at the back of this leaflet.

Reactions of children and young people

To summarise, here are some of the reactions which may be shown by children or young people who have lost someone significant through bereavement:

- Shock/numbness
- Disbelief
- Fear/anxiety
- Anger
- No reaction
- Guilt
- Avoidance
- Sadness and crying
- Sleep difficulties
- Longing
- Confusion
- Loss of appetite
- Physical complaints e.g. upset stomach
- Reluctance to talk

Many of these reactions may also be seen in children or young people who have experienced family break-up and other types of loss or negative change. For example, they may feel shocked that parents have decided to separate. They may be particularly upset if one parent has left the family home abruptly. They may long for parents to reunite.

It is important to remember that:

- Reactions may vary from child to child. Reactions may be influenced by factors such as the age of the child, their personal experience of bereavement or family break-up in the past, the support networks available to them, the circumstances surrounding the death or family break-up and parental adjustment to the change.
- The reactions of children and young people, such as those outlined above, are normal. However, your child may require extra help in dealing with the change if reactions persist over a long period of time or prevent your child returning to a normal way of life.
- Children do not 'get over it'. However with help and support they will gradually be able to return to coping with life, incorporating the loss and remembering the deceased in a positive way.

First response – how to help your child

- As loved family members, you are in the best position to help your child through this period.
- This is one occasion where it is okay to show your own grief. It is best not to bottle up your own sadness to help your child.
- Their first reaction is likely to be one of shock and disbelief, so it is important to be as supportive as possible.
- Comfort your child in whatever way feels natural and appropriate.
- Be prepared that your child may regress to an earlier stage, for example, behaving as they did when they were younger and 'losing' skills.
- Listen to how your child feels and let them know it is okay to feel this way.
- It is very important to deal with matters and answer any questions openly and honestly, keeping in mind the age of your child.

Rituals/funerals - how children can participate

- If you feel your child is old enough, let them participate in the funeral.
- Talk to your child about the funeral. Let them know what to expect. Answer any questions as clearly and truthfully as possible.
- Discuss with your child whether they want to go. Try to alleviate anxieties by talking about where they will sit, who with, how they will get there, etc.
- If they are not to attend the funeral, ensure they are clear about where they are to go, who will look after them etc.
- If they do not attend, discuss other ways of saying goodbye, for example having a little memorial service at home. See next section for some more ideas.

Continuing the support

- Encourage your child to talk about their grief or loss.
- Let them know that grieving is a process which may involve disbelief, anger, guilt or other emotions, and eventually they will feel better.
- Be aware that sometimes your child may display seemingly inappropriate behaviour e.g. they may seem not to be making any responses or even display high spirits or euphoria. Remember that this is a normal reaction and does not mean the child is not grieving.
- Special occasions, such as birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas can be difficult. As a family, you may want to light a candle for the person on their birthday and perhaps lay flowers together at the graveside.
- It may be important to view favourite photographs of the deceased or create a memory box of important mementos.
- Explain to your child's teacher what has happened so that he/she can help your child cope in school or nursery.
- Encourage a return to a normal routine as soon as possible.

How to help your child cope with grief

- Young children may not understand much about what death is, so it is important to convey the idea that the dead person is not going to return.
- Try to be as truthful with the young person or child as possible taking account of their age.
- Avoid euphemisms, e.g. 'passed away', 'gone to sleep', 'gone to the other side' etc. as these may be confusing and distressing.
- If you are a spiritual or religious family, the idea of the dead person going to heaven usually helps but it is important not to make up stories which you, yourself, do not believe. Try to be as truthful as possible.

- Explain that the dead person will always live in their memory.
- Do not hold the dead person up as a threat e.g. 'what would your dad think?' but rather, 'your dad would be proud of you'.
- A young person or child may feel that the death is somehow their fault. It is important to reassure them that this is not the case.
- Anger against the dead person is a natural part of the grieving process. Encourage your child to express this in an appropriate way.
- Children learn through play and their role play may include ideas about death. Do not be frightened by this. It is completely natural. Join in if you can, but take a lead from your child.
- Be aware that your child may dip in and out of grief: one minute they may be showing signs of upset, the next, they may be playing. This does not mean that they are not grieving, but perhaps need a break from their emotions at this point.
- Young children may seem very matter of fact, for example after discussing the death of the person they may say: "Can I go and play now?" Try not to be upset or hurt by this - it is your child's way of coping.

My child seemed to be getting over the death, but now is upset again

- There is no precise timetable for ending grieving but remember that anniversaries and Christmas are likely to be difficult times.
- Ask your child if something else is worrying them, e.g. if the deceased person always helped them with their maths or perhaps took them to football. They may need someone else in the family to help or share the enjoyable activity.
- If your child is having bad dreams or nightmares, Psychological Services have a leaflet on how to help. Please ask your school or psychologist.

To summarise, grieving children need the following:

- Reassurance
- Open and honest communication
- Recognition of grief
- The opportunity to share their grief
- The opportunity to say goodbye
- Opportunities to remember the deceased
- A break in grieving – time to have fun

Support agencies

- Petal – www.petalsupport.com (a charity based in Hamilton for those effected by traumatic loss such as murder or suicide)
- Cruse (Hamilton, East Kilbride) - www.crusescotland.org.uk
- Break – www.break-charity.org
- Action for Children – www.actionforchildren.org.uk
- Childline – www.childline.org.uk
- The Samaritans – www.samaritans.org
- Scottish Childhood Bereavement Network – www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk
- Give us a Break! – www.giveusabreak.org.uk
- Winston's Wish – www.winstonswish.org.uk
- RD4U - www.rd4u.org.uk (special Cruse website for children and young people)

Hamilton Psychological Services

23 Beckford Street
HAMILTON
ML3 0BT
Tel: 01698 455800

Cam/Glen Psychological Services

Cambuslang Gate
27 Main Street
Cambuslang
G72 7EX
Tel: 0141 613 5160

Lanark Psychological Services

Council Offices
South Vennel
LANARK
ML11 7JT
Tel: 01555 673249

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If you need this information in another language or format, please contact us to discuss how we can best meet your needs. Phone 01698 455800 or email enquiries@slcpsych.org.uk

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