

Notes on some Frequently Asked Questions about bereaved younger children

Introduction

Rose Griffiths (University of Leicester School of Education) and Sacha Richardson (The Laura Centre) wrote these notes as part of a training pack. The full 'Not Too Young to Grieve' training pack can be freely downloaded from the Childhood Bereavement Network website. This training pack was designed to be used with the 'Not Too Young to Grieve' DVD, which is available from most library services and Leeds Animation Workshop.

There are no definitive "right" answers to these questions, nor are these notes complete, we hope they may provide a useful starting place.

(a) How do you explain what "dead" means to a young child?

- Young children need repeated age appropriate information.
- It may take years for full comprehension to develop.
- Use the words "dead" and "died" rather than words like "gone to sleep", or "lost".
- Give a simple explanation of the cause of death and how that prevents the body from working.
- Explain that someone who has died does not eat or drink, nor feel pain. They have not gone away, so they can't come back to life.
- Seeing a creature that is dead helps understanding more than words. Even seeing a dead insect and noticing the differences from a live insect can help.
- In many cultures it is expected that children will be able to see the dead body, to help them understand what has happened.

(b) What should I do in the immediate aftermath of a death, to help a child or their carer? Should I say anything, or send a card?

- This is a significant event in a child's life and we need to acknowledge it. Just saying something like "I am very sorry to hear your mummy has died" is important. It helps the child to know that you are aware of the death.
- A card or note to a carer acknowledges this loss and may give you the opportunity to offer help.

- Talk to colleagues about who needs to know about the death and how you will share this information.
- When deciding what information needs to be shared and how consider the needs of: the bereaved child and their family, other children, and staff in your setting.

(c) How can we include children in the ceremonies surrounding death?

- Some families will follow fixed or traditional practices or customs following a death. Children benefit from a clear explanation of what is going to happen.
- Even quite young children can contribute to a funeral or memorial, for example, by choosing flowers, a piece of music, drawing a picture or choosing a favourite toy to bring with them.
- Sometimes if a child has not been directly involved in the funeral (or was not able to understand it), the family could hold a child-friendly ceremony to remember and say good-bye.

(d) What can we do to stop children blaming themselves or others unrealistically?

- Make sure you use simple and unambiguous words to explain the cause of death. In many cases words such as “there is nothing anyone (or we) could have done to stop Daddy dying” are helpful.
- Pay attention to what a child says or does, including in any role play, so that you can reassure them if they show signs of guilt or regret about things they have done.
- Remind them of positive things they did for the person who died. For example, “Your sister loved playing hide and seek with you”.
- If a close family member or carer has a terminal illness it is helpful to give some advance warning that they are seriously ill.

(e) When a child who has been bereaved is behaving badly, how should we respond?

- Make sure that you do not label a child ‘bad’ because of particular behaviours. Noticing when, where and with whom a child behaves in a certain way will help you to find ways of responding appropriately.

- It is generally helpful to keep consistent boundaries. Knowing there are limits helps children feel more secure.
- Whilst still keeping boundaries it is helpful to acknowledge feelings that may be being expressed. "I can see that you are very angry, it is OK to be angry, but not OK to punch me".
- Whilst not condoning bad behaviour it is important to try to understand what may be behind it.
- It is quite common for children to be less capable and appear to go backwards for a time following a bereavement. Concentration and other abilities may not be at the level they were before, especially if a child feels anxious or afraid.
- Addressing the needs of the child for instance for information, reassurance and security may help to address the underlying cause of bad behaviour.

(f) For how long will children grieve?

- A significant bereavement will be part of a child's experience for the rest of their life.
- Certain events, reminders or anniversaries are likely to trigger feelings and thoughts about the dead person.
- Children go in and out of grief. This is true both over the short and longer term. So directly following a bereavement they may move in and out of grief feelings from moment to moment.
- As they grow and develop they may re-visit a death with their new awareness and understanding, this may trigger new feelings of grief.
- The Harvard Bereavement Study clearly illustrated the long-term affect of the death of a parent on children. At the end of the two-year long study it found that more children showed signs of being "emotionally at risk" than immediately following the death. This reflects a number of factors including further losses (e.g. moving, finance, family relationships) and the ability of the bereaved carer to look after them.

(g) Should staff share their own feelings with children? How can staff support each other?

- Children learn from others. Often it is through adults talking about thoughts and feelings that children make sense of their own experience.

- In supporting a child we need to focus on their experience rather than our own. However it is important to acknowledge your own feelings, especially where they also recognise a child's loss e.g. "I feel sad when I think about your mummy dying".
- Talking about your own experience of loss in age appropriate language can be very helpful to a young child.
- All staff that work with a bereaved child need to be informed as quickly and clearly as possible about a death. If a death affects a whole staff team try to ensure that everyone is informed.
- In supporting staff it is important to respect individual differences. Some may need the opportunity to talk; others may prefer to cope by getting involved in other activities or focussing on the needs of the children. It is valuable to acknowledge the impact a bereavement may have on the staff.
- Some time at staff meetings can be given to address issues and acknowledge the impact of a loss.

(h) How can we help children to remember and make sense of the life of the person who has died?

- Talk naturally about the person who died.
- Photographs are invaluable in helping to recreate some aspects of the life of the person who died.
- A child is likely to be interested in two different aspects of their life: 1) the relationship to the child and 2) what they were like as a person. So, if a parent has died, a grandparent will be in a unique position to share about their life as a child.
- Creating memory boxes for each bereaved child helps honour their unique relationship to a dead person.
- Sensitively acknowledging anniversaries and other significant events (e.g. Mother's day) may provide opportunities for the child to remember and make sense of their loss.

(i) How are other young children likely to react when one of their peers is bereaved? Why do young children sometimes react by bullying a child whose mother or father has died?

- They may react in a whole host of ways; some common reactions are fear, disbelief, not understanding, anger and sympathy.
- The information they are given including guidance about how to be with the bereaved child can make a significant difference to behaviour.
- It seems likely that bullying sometimes comes about from fear. Often children find it frightening to think that someone so significant can die. They may blame the bereaved child for their own feelings and want to make them wrong for what has happened.
- Children sometimes use 'difference' as a cue to bully. Bereaved children's own behaviour may add to the perceived difference. On occasion they may also exhibit angry and aggressive behaviour, which may trigger reprisals.

(j) What should we do about mother's day and father's day? Are there any other significant celebrations where we need to be especially thoughtful about a bereaved child's experience?

- Openly acknowledge the anniversary recognising that if a father or mother has died these days may highlight the loss.
- If an activity has been planned give the child a choice about taking part, and in what way. In many cases a child will be pleased to make a card for a deceased parent, perhaps placing this on a grave or other special place.
- Other days are child, family and culture specific. Birthdays, religious festivals, visits or meetings with people that have a particular connection to the deceased may all trigger stronger feelings of loss. All these occasions also provide opportunities to remember the person who has died and honour the importance of their relationship.
- Having acknowledged someone's absence it can be helpful to give a clear message that it is OK for children to have fun. For instance, "mum would really want you to enjoy your birthday".

(k) Should we talk about heaven?

- We need to be aware that young children may not be able to clearly understand any explanation of death whether spiritual or physical in nature. Their understanding will increase as they develop.

- It is important to make sure that religious or spiritual explanations do not create fears through misunderstandings. For instance, being frightened that someone (“Jesus”) can come and take you away.
- For many children and families it is natural and important to talk about heaven or another form of after life. It is important to acknowledge and respect this part of a child’s reality.
- Professionals sometimes feel uncomfortable talking about faith. Remember choices can always be given: for instance, “some people believe..., what do you think?”
- It is important to link going to heaven, with some concept of a time to die. Otherwise children may want to go their now.
- People with religious faith would say that the concept of heaven provides comfort and reassurance and is helpful for people.

(l) What do you say if a parent has died not from illness but from suicide, murder, drug abuse or a preventable accident?

- Children benefit from being in an open and honest environment
- Each case is unique and it is important to be discerning about how to support each individual child.
- Sometimes it may be appropriate for a child to learn the whole story about a death over a long period of time, as they develop and grow.
- On occasion more and more detail about the death may be given as a child asks for it.
- There are occasions when certain details about a death are public knowledge and the child may be surrounded by people talking about a death. In these cases it is important to give the child the best information possible.
- If there is a great deal of anger in the family about a death, then some understanding of who or what the anger is directed at helps a child to know that they are not being blamed.

(m) How can we help bereaved babies and very young children to feel more secure?

- Responding to the basic need for physical holding.
- Providing as much that is familiar as possible.

- Sharing openly in age appropriate fashion, for instance allowing them the chance to see the body of the deceased.
- Providing as much continuity of care and carer as possible.

(n) How do you help a child while they are adjusting to a new home or carer?

- Be sensitive to the impact of the change; pay close attention to how the child is responding.
- Acknowledge the reality of the change by talking about differences e.g. going to bed is different now because you share a room with Ranjit,...
- Where possible allow the child some choice. Even being given small choices (“Do you want your bed here in this corner or in that one over there?”) helps to give a sense of some personal control.
- Keep as much of familiar helpful routine as possible.
- Allow child to take their time to adjust, allow them to express negative feelings about the change, including towards new carers in their lives.

(o) What physical symptoms of illness might a child have, as a result of a bereavement?

- First, if a child displays any physical symptoms it is important to treat them as medically appropriate. Make sure that any illness or underlying physical cause has been treated or ruled out.
- Grief and other strong emotional pain hurts, sometimes it hurts physically – places that many people feel this pain are in the throat, chest, stomach and head.
- A child may worry that they could have the same illness as the person who died, and they may echo symptoms of the illness. This may be to seek reassurance that they will be OK.
- Sometimes being physically hurt may provide the opportunity to cry or release other feelings. Children may on occasion deliberately fall over for this release and/or because they need attention.

(p) If a parent who died was estranged from the one who is now looking after a child, what issues might arise?

- Family conflict, including issues about custody of the child.
- The child is likely to have to cope with a lot of further changes, these might include: moving house, friends, nursery/school, losing and/or gaining contact with relatives and having a new main carer.
- Where there was little contact with the parent who died it may take longer for the death to fully register. This may be a death and relationship that the child will need to re-visit as they develop.
- If the parent who has died was the main carer then basic issues of care and routine will arise.
- This is a potentially difficult situation for everyone, however it will make a great difference if people can adopt a child-centred approach when considering practical arrangements.
- A child in this situation has all the needs referred to earlier in the training but some of the needs may be harder to meet or require extra effort on the part of carer(s).
- This situation may be one where a professional setting – playschool, nursery or a child minder – may provide valuable continuity and familiarity.