

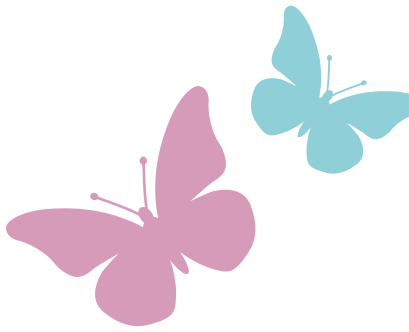
my  
county  
council

# Helping young children deal with loss and grief

An information booklet



Northamptonshire  
County Council



## How Children Understand Loss

### 0-6 months

The security and consistency of their care is disrupted. The child may look for the lost person and protest when they do not appear. They are often affected by the emotional state of caregivers.

### 6 months - 2 years

The child is starting to understand that when things are out of sight they are still there and will return. They will look for the missing person and become anxious if they are not found.

### 2-5 years

Unable to grasp permanence of death, the child may behave in a way that is designed to get the person back:

- crying,
- clinging
- showing anger through destructive behaviour
- tantrums.

They may repeatedly ask when the person is coming back and may find it impossible to believe that the person will not return.

A loss undermines the child's security and sense of reliability of the world. They will seek constant reassurance and explanations, although explanations can often confuse them

Frequently children experience fears that they too will disappear.



### 0 to 6 months

The baby may become irritable or develop erratic eating, sleeping and crying patterns.

### 6 months to 2 years

Signs of separation anxiety; apathy, withdrawal and a lack of interest in toys and food may be expected from the child of this age, unable to understand why the person does not come back.

### 2 years to 5 years

The child has less ability than adults to cope with severe emotional pain for any length of time. They may move from apparent unconcern to the depths of despair very rapidly.

Strategies children sometimes use to try to minimise pain are to:

- deny being upset and show the opposite
- imitate films or stories in which people have died
- become more clingy
- return to earlier behaviours such as bed wetting
- displace pain and get very upset over something apparently small things

## Normal Reactions to Loss

- become obsessive about death, funerals etc
- have outbursts of aggression or temper
- become withdrawn or isolated
- lack interest in things
- escalate attention seeking behaviour
- become less independent or pretend to be helpless
- develop physical symptoms such as headache or loss of appetite



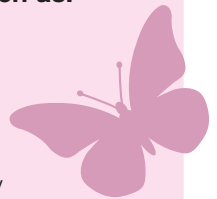


## Practical Ways to Help

- Use a nightlight if the child is afraid of the dark
- Dress them in extra warm clothes or give them warm quilts to snuggle into
- Tuck them in tightly at night
- Give special treats
- Adjust the amount of food offered according to their appetite
- Give them comforting food, the things that remind them of earlier, happier times
- Accept all the feelings they express and share some of yours
- Do not tell a child not to worry or to cheer up
- Keep to routines
- Talk about the person that has died or gone away
- Give plenty of hugs, attention and your time
- Keep boundaries, but show understanding of unwanted behaviour
- Let them know that it was not their fault

### Help the child to express feelings through activities such as:

- Role play
- Puppet work
- Messy or noisy play
- Physical activity
- Stories and pictures
- Memory boxes or boo



Be honest. It is acceptable to say that no one knows yet.

Children may ask the same question repeatedly. Keep repeating the answer. This gives them security and helps them to take in what has happened.

Between the ages of 2 and 5 children are easily confused about explanations of death. Keep answers as simple as possible.

Only explain for as long as the child can listen. If they walk away in the middle of an explanation they have taken in all they can at that time.

For young children you may need to give one piece of information at a time.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Q Why can't (name) get up any more?**

**A** (Name) died because he was ill. That means his body is no use to him any more. He cannot feel anything now, so he won't hurt any more. He cannot think either, so he will never be scared or sad any more.

**Q Why has (name) not had his tea?**

**A** (Name) does not need to eat now because he is dead and his body is no use to him now. He does not

## Answering children's questions about death

need to have cuddles or eat or play. Just like the leaves fall off the trees and die. They are still beautiful, but they are different.

**Q Why doesn't (name) wake up?**

**A** (Name) isn't sleeping. Sleep and death are different. When we sleep we rest our bodies so that we have lots of energy for the next day. When someone dies his or her body stops working, so they don't wake up or fall asleep. (name)'s body has finished working.

**Q What will happen to (name) now?**

**A** We will have his body put into a big box called a coffin. Then we can choose. We could have it buried in the ground in a special garden called a cemetery. If we didn't want to do that we could have his body changed into ashes that we could bury in the ground, or scatter somewhere we choose.



**Q** What happens to dead people?

**A** Many people think that the part of a person that makes them who they are; the person that loves you, is not the same as the body, but lives in the body. That part of a person is called their spirit. When the body dies the spirit lives on and even though we can't see it, it never wears out.

**Q** What is heaven like?

**A** We cannot tell what heaven looks like. We don't know where it is. Many people think it is somewhere full of love where our spirits go when they leave out bodies.

**Q** Why did (name) die?

**A** (Name) died because .... It did not happen because of anything that you said or did. He loved you and would have stayed here with you if he could have done. There is nothing that anyone can do now to make him come alive again. We will remember him just as he was.

**Q** What is a funeral?

**A** A funeral is a special meeting when anyone who knew (name) can go and remember him. Sometimes people cry at funerals. People say prayers and sing special songs.

**Q** Am I going to die?

**A** We will all die one day. You are young and strong so you should live for a long, long time. Usually people die when they are very old and their bodies are worn out.

**Q** Will I ever feel better?

**A** We all feel sad that (name) has died. That is okay. When we feel sad we can cry together or give each other a cuddle. You will feel better one day.

**Q** Is it okay to be happy and play?

**A** (Name) would have wanted you to remember the happy things about him and go on playing and talking to your friends.





## The specialness of being loved

When a child experiences the loss of a special person, it is important to speak about what it felt like to be loved by and to love that person, as well as the pain of their loss. This may help the child to understand why they are hurting so much.

The following are the sort of statements you might use when the child wants to talk. Make sure you put them into language the child can understand.

- You felt that (name) loved you very much
- (Name) seemed to understand all about you
- (Name) loved you just as you are and whatever you did.



## Responding to children's feelings about death

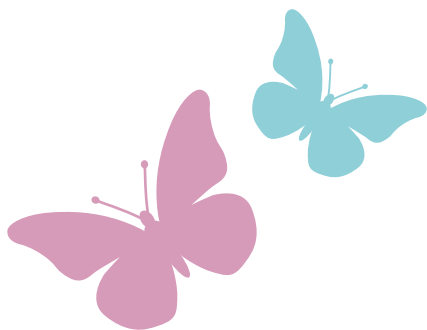
Help the child to acknowledge their feelings and talk about them. It is important to let them know that no feelings are wrong, or cannot be talked about.

Help them by acknowledging that:

- When someone you love is not there anymore, it hurts.
- It is fine to feel happy sometimes and sad at others
- Sometimes everything might seem cold, boring and dull
- You might feel as if you want to hide away forever.
- It is fine to cry
- It helps to talk
- You can always remember
- Things might change
- It is okay to feel angry
- Feeling very sad is hard on your own. It helps to find someone to be sad with.







## Recognising when a child needs help with the grieving process

It is normal to see changed behaviour for a short time after a loss. Usually symptoms of grieving disappear after a year. However as children's understanding of death reaches a more mature level, they often revisit previous losses and grieve again.

The following behaviour may indicate that a child can't deal with their feelings or is overwhelmed by them. They might suggest (with parents/carers' permission) the need to refer on:

- Numbness that goes on. Perhaps the child does not cry. This is only a concern if the child really loved the lost person.
- Continuing denial – "I didn't really need Daddy anyway"
- Obsessions, such as wanting new things or food
- Intense and persistent anger
- Fear of losing other people or things that results in over the top, anxiety. The child may repeatedly have to check that things are still there.

- Unwillingness or an inability to form relationships, particularly new ones, focusing on an inner world
- Despair because the child sees him or herself as unlovable, "He's gone, I'm no good".

### If things don't get better, contact your Area SENCo

Corby/Kettering	01536 533930
Daventry	01604 857382
Northampton	01604 857382
Wellingborough	01933 440289





“My friend told me that the best thing you can do for someone who is feeling really sad is to hold their hand.”



This information can be made available in other languages and formats upon request including Braille, audio cassette and floppy disk. Contact 01933 440289

[www.northamptonshire.gov.uk](http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk)

Produced January 2009

