

## Insight into...



# Supporting Children & Young People with Loss & Bereavement



Health &amp; Wellbeing Series: 2

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@WL\_EPS

*"If there ever comes a day when we can't be together, keep me in your heart, I'll stay there forever" A. A. Milne*

The news that someone has died may come as a huge shock to a young person and they may struggle to manage and understand the overwhelming feelings of grief. It is vital to support children during these difficult times.

*This Insight document has been designed to be read alongside the West Lothian "[A Whole Community Approach to Supporting Children and Young People with Loss and Bereavement](#)" guide, which also contains details of a number of helpful resources and websites.*

## Common Reactions to Grief

The way a child reacts to death will vary depending on their relationship to the person who died, their age and stage of development and their network of support. These are some of the most common emotions and feelings:



## What can I do to help?

- ◆ **Talk to your child:** Be honest and open, give factual information using language appropriate to their age & stage of development. Be guided by their questions. Use language which is real and clear e.g. "I am really sorry that Gran has died". Avoid using abstract language such as "lost", "gone to sleep" or "gone to a better place" as this can confuse younger children and frustrate older ones. Don't avoid the topic when asked. Be honest if there are things you don't know yet, but explain that you will look into it and answer later.
- ◆ **Address their fears and anxieties:** it is important to take time to talk about what is happening to help them make sense of the events and feel less afraid.
- ◆ **Reassure them:** a child surviving when family members die may feel guilty. Reassure them that they are not to blame.
- ◆ **Careful Listening:** be available for your child and be prepared to discuss the same details again and again.
- ◆ **Validate their feelings & emotions:** allow your child time and space to grieve and to express their feelings, ask them how they feel and reassure them that it's ok to feel that way.
- ◆ **Help with overwhelming feelings:** Anger is a common emotion when grieving, encourage safe ways to manage this such as punching a pillow, ripping paper, intense exercise such as running, kicking a ball. Encourage calming routines such as focused steady breathing, listening to music, colouring in, keeping a diary. Be available to your child, nurture them, reassure them and try to be predictable to help them feel safe and cared for.
- ◆ **Involvement & Inclusion:** include your child in the funeral planning and remembrance decisions/ activities.
- ◆ **Continued routine activities:** try to keep to normal routines and provide stability at home. When they feel ready have a "tool kit" or list of things they enjoy doing.
- ◆ **Model grief behaviour:** Show children how you feel, don't be afraid to admit feeling sad.
- ◆ **Opportunity to remember:** Children can be encouraged to share their memories and express their feelings and emotions in a number of ways (see p2 for ideas).

## Funerals





The decision as to whether a child attends a funeral or not is a very personal one and will depend on many factors. Involving a child in a funeral helps them to understand the finality of death as well as providing an opportunity to say goodbye. Attending the funeral can also be a way of helping them to feel connected to other people who are grieving as well as to the person who has died.

- ◆ Talk to your child about what to expect at a funeral to help them decide whether or not to attend
- ◆ Prepare them for what they might see; some people might be very upset, some people will be celebrating the happy times but this doesn't mean they are happy that the person has died
- ◆ Give them lots of reassurance & let them know that can change their mind at any time
- ◆ Involve them in the service: they could draw a picture or write a letter to go in the coffin or they could write a poem or memory to be read out at the service

If a child chooses not to attend the funeral they could still contribute to the service in the ways mentioned, or they could have their own private memorial service at home and perhaps light a candle, play a favourite piece of music or share special memories.



## Remembering

- ◆ **Artwork:** draw or paint a picture .
- ◆ **Music:** create a playlist of the person's favourite music & songs. 
- ◆ **Poetry/Creative Writing:** create an acrostic poem or write a story of the person who has died.
- ◆ **Memory box:** create a special box containing special items that remind them of the person who has died and times shared with them.
- ◆ **Memory book:** containing photos/pictures of the person and their favourite places/ people etc. This could be done electronically and shared with others.
- ◆ **Family Record:** can help the child or young person gain a sense of where they and the person who has died fits into the family. Family photographs, documents, certificates & mementos can be included or this could be expressed through a family tree. 
- ◆ **Perfume/Aftershave:** sprayed on a scarf or hankie can be a source of comfort.
- ◆ **Comfort cushion:** made from an item of clothing belonging to the person who died.
- ◆ **Memory Jar:** Some children can find it difficult to express their thoughts and feelings around a bereavement so creating a memory jar with different colours of sand or chalk mixed with salt can be a visual way of helping them to represent their memories.  Objects with significant meaning can also be added.
- ◆ **Grief mask:** Children can often hide their grief for a number of reasons including not wanting to add to the pain of an adult in their life, or not wanting to appear like they're not coping. A grief mask is a creative tool that can help children to express the feelings they show to the world compared to hidden emotions they feel on the inside. 

## Further Supports and Information

Child Bereavement UK

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

Child Bereavement Network

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Winston's Wish

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Grief Encounter

[www.griefencounter.org.uk](http://www.griefencounter.org.uk)

Cruse

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)



If you are a **parent/carer**....take care of yourself. Allow yourself time and space to grieve for your own loss. The more you look after yourself, the better able you will be to support your child

If you are a member of **staff**....see [A Whole Community Approach to Supporting Children and Young People with Loss and Bereavement](#) for a number of safeguarding procedures that can help staff avoid becoming overburdened or distressed.