

Supporting bereaved children

Responding to children's reactions – general

- Existing attachments and relationships may need re-building
- Love and care within the family groups is a primary need
- Children may need to be reassured that someone will take care of them
- Physical closeness is usually appropriate
- It is important to listen to pupils and talk to them about what has happened. For example encourage expression (eg crying, laughter), listen for confused thinking, answer questions honestly, do not be afraid to say 'I do not know', ensure the child is not blaming themselves
- Opportunities should be provided for the child to express themselves in various ways (e.g. painting, drawing, and writing, using puppets or other play materials)
- Tolerate regressive behaviours and accept aggression and anger, especially in the early stages, while ensuring the child and others are kept safe
- Reaffirming the future and talking in hopeful terms about future events can help a child rebuild, trust and have faith in his/her own future
- Issues of death should be handled with regard to the child's age and level of understanding. There are some responses that tend to be typical of various age groups

Possible reactions to grief and strategies according to child's age

2-5 years

- Death viewed as temporary
- May ask when deceased person is coming back
- May be matter-of-fact or appear unconcerned when told of the death
- Take explanations literally
- Need simple factual explanations that cannot be misconstrued
- May believe they have caused the death by bad behaviour or bad thoughts
- May believe the deceased person will return if they are very, very good
- May show separation anxiety
- Can feel helpless, powerless and unable to protect themselves. Separation anxiety may emerge
- May become very fearful
- May recreate elements of trauma / loss through play. If children are engaged in such play, show an interest and be curious – try not to shut down the play, instead use it as an opportunity to explore issues such as right and wrong and the child's feelings / responses

Things that may help

- Answer questions honestly and simply
- Encourage expression
- Listen for confused thinking
- Reduce ideas of self-blame
- Be approachable
- Give appropriate comfort cuddles
- Encourage dramatic play

6-8 years

- Begin to understand reality and finality of death
- Knowledge of death may be a mixture of fact and fantasy
- May visualise death as a skeleton or ghost
- May believe they can cause death by wishing it
- May be interested in the biological aspects of death
- Questions may be upsetting for adults
- Will need simple and honest answers
- Denial is a common reaction
- Focus on their own feelings
- Little awareness of the impact of death on others
- May grieve in short, intermittent bursts
- May become preoccupied with details and want to talk about it continually
- May show signs of guilt, feelings of failure and anger
- Complain of feeling unwell (somatic complaints)

Things that may help

- Provide a secure, caring environment
- Listen, reassure and comfort
- Answer questions as simply and honestly as possible
- Allow expressions of feeling
- Listen for confused thinking
- Provide opportunities for creative activities (painting, drawing, colouring, building, sand / water play etc.)

9-12 years

- May understand the permanence and irreversibility of death
- Will have more understanding of the extent of the loss
- May realise that they will die one day
- Can understand what the loss may mean to others
- May try to behave like adults
- May assume role of deceased parent
- May postpone grief to support other family members
- Friends may be important for support and consolation
- May experience difficulties in interactions with peers – they may feel different from others
- May repeatedly go over details
- May become anxious, insecure, fearful

Things that may help

- Opportunities to be heard, acknowledged and accepted
- Acknowledge feelings, allow expression of emotions
- Help them understand their reactions
- Be patient
- Provide reassurance and comfort
- Answer questions openly and honestly

Adolescents

- Friends and peers are very important
- They will have 'adult' understanding without necessarily having the emotional development to manage adult responsibilities
- May struggle to make longer term plans
- May keep so busy they do not 'have time' to reflect / grieve
- May be worried about losing control of their emotions or find it difficult to manage other stressful situations
- May increase risk-taking behaviours
- May feel angry, or feel sense of injustice, futility or senselessness
- May feel isolated or lonely or just sad
- May be confused / disorganised and have difficulty coping with day to day issues

- May experience heightened anxiety

Things that may help

- Listen
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings
- An expression of sadness, a hug or a touch may be all that is needed
- Encourage them to remember the deceased person and talk about them if they want to
- Encourage them to find ways forward and avoid telling them how they should feel or act
- Keep to normal routines as much as possible – they help
- Allow time and space
- Provide access to support / counselling – can help to talk to others who have had similar experiences