

SUPPORTING SUDDENLY BEREAVED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE



Bereavement is a normal part of the life cycle. Losing someone significant will always involve complex feelings and emotions. A sudden and unexpected death can be devastating for children and young people and their families. The bereavement comes out of the blue, with no time to prepare and certainly no opportunities for saying goodbye. In these circumstances, caregivers can struggle to support children and young people as they themselves are overwhelmed by their grief.

Sudden death isn't always violent or horrific, but it certainly can be, for example where death is as a result of a road traffic accident or through suicide. Suddenly bereaved children and young people are often left in shock, and common reactions can include great difficulty in even comprehending the death. Supporting suddenly bereaved children and young people is similar in many ways to providing support after any bereavement, but the element of shock and trauma can make it more complex.



HOW WILL CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE RESPOND AFTER A SUDDEN BEREAVEMENT?

Children and young people respond to shock in similar ways to adults, but they may express their emotions differently. Every bereavement is unique, impacted by multiple issues such as the relationship the child or young person had with the person who has died, their developmental stage, their personality type, their support networks etc.

Each child or young person is different, and their grieving process will be unique to them, but common responses to sudden death can include:

- Feelings that the accident/event is happening again, especially if they were there at the time and witnessed the death
- Nightmares
- Images of the event popping into their minds unexpectedly and in a distressing way
- Not wanting to talk about the accident/event – shutting down and avoiding anything that might serve as a reminder
- Feeling emotionally numb and detached from others -Repeatedly and obsessively drawing or writing about the death
- Extreme sensitivity – getting angry and upset much more easily and in a more extreme and prolonged way. Possibly aggressive behaviour -Inability to concentrate on anything
- Inability to sleep
- Assuming the death was their fault - guilt
- Being more anxious and aware of dangers – being 'jumpy' and overly sensitive to risks
- Being clingier to caregivers – struggling when away from them

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- Physical complaints – stomach aches, headaches, nausea, excessive tiredness and lethargy

Regression to an earlier stage of development, e.g. starting to bed wet again after having been dry at night

- Problems within friendship groups – feeling isolated, misunderstood by friends and 'different' from their peers
- Problems at school – feeling demotivated with schoolwork, non-compliance with school rules
- Need for detailed information about the accident/event, plus repeated questioning, even if answers have been given. Inability to trust adults after the accident/event
- Feeling that the future holds no meaning and that there is nothing to look forward to

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP?

Love, comfort and reassurance – children need love, comfort and reassurance that they are loved and cared for and will be kept safe as far as possible. Separation anxiety can be an issue, especially for young children, and comfort objects can help with this

Routine and normality - Everyone feels safer when they are 'held' by a routine and they know what to expect. As appropriate, try and make things as normal as possible, whilst at the same time allowing time to talk about what has happened when children want to. This can be particularly helpful for younger children, who find routine comforting



Understanding death – depending on the age and stage of development of each individual child, their understanding of what death actually means can vary. Some children can seem to have grasped that their loved one is dead, but then can ask almost in the same breath when they are coming back. The permanency of death may need to be explained on numerous occasions, and support given when this is distressing. Using clear language, that doesn't confuse, is very important

Involvement in the mourning rites and the funeral – it's often felt to be the case that children and young people shouldn't be part of the mourning rituals or the funeral planning, but being excluded from this can be deeply upsetting. Funerals after sudden and unexpected deaths can in themselves be quite traumatic. If a child has engaged in the planning process in some way, it can help them to feel part of the 'family team' going forwards, and can help them to understand what to expect when they attend the funeral – so that it's not too shocking

Understanding what has happened – given that sudden death can lead to shock, and shock can in turn prevent us from understanding what is going on, it's important that children and young people have opportunities to ask questions and have things explained to them. They can sometimes want explanations to be repeated over and over again as they struggle to comprehend what has happened. Explanations should be as truthful as possible and appropriate for the child's age. Having an understanding of what has happened is very important and can help in a number of ways:

- Understanding can help a child to make sense of the upsetting event, which over time can help to reduce fear and support the processing of sadness and anger
- Talking through the details of the accident/event can correct misunderstandings and inaccuracies which are unhelpful. Being clear, open and honest, and repeating the same details gives comfort in the face of uncertainty

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- Building their own understanding about what has happened means that children can then talk about the accident/event with more certainty and seek support when they need it
- Building their own understanding gives children perspective, so that their fears about the accident/event happening to others they love is not out of proportion

Normalising grief – caregivers often worry about showing their own grief in front of children and young people. Strong displays of emotion can be upsetting, but it can be equally unsettling to feel that you are the only one who is grieving.



Viewing the body - After a sudden death, families are faced with lots of difficult

choices and decisions at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Making the decision about whether or not a child should go and see the person who has died can be complex and painful.

Adults are often grieving themselves, and find it hard to judge if the child will be helped or traumatised by viewing the body.

However, children may feel hurt if they do not have the opportunity to say goodbye, and this hurt can lead to resentment and upset. The starting point should always be finding out what the child wants. For further information, please see our Information Sheet 2 – Seeing the Person Who Has Died.

THINGS TO NOTE

- Sudden bereavement is not a short-term problem; the effects can last for years
- Children and young people's ability to process and deal with a sudden death can be affected by specifics of the accident/event – e.g. if it is a court case, or high profile in newspapers and on social media etc.
- Schools have an important role to play in offering reassurance, a listening ear and a safe place for a bereaved child or young person. Being flexible about deadlines etc. can be very helpful
- Having access to age sensitive and accurate information is essential to being able to process a sudden death

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Suddenly bereaved children and young people can be supported to talk about their feelings and to focus on the future as well as the present and the past. There is often additional trauma associated with sudden and unexpected death, and sometimes the support of a trauma specialist is appropriate.