

HELPING A CHILD COPE WITH THE DEATH OF A PARENT OR CARER



There is no 'right' way to support children after the death of a parent or carer. Every child is different and every set of circumstances is different. This paper sets out some ideas which may be helpful to those who are providing care and support to the grieving child.

After a death, many children want to share their story, and telling their story can be a healing experience. One of the best ways adults can help children and young people who are grieving is to listen to them as they process their feelings, their memories and their anxieties for the future

Children also need continuity, so where appropriate, normal activities can still take place. They need loving care and to still feel connected to the parent or carer who has died, and to their parent or carer going forwards.



CONTINUITY

It is important to maintain some normal activities at home and at school where possible and appropriate. This will of course be dependent on the circumstances of the bereavement.

Parents or carers should talk to the child's school and teacher about what has happened as soon as they can so that they are able to provide extra support for the child.

CARE

Where possible, the parent or carer can make time to give the child plenty of hugs and cuddles. Grief can be a very lonely experience for children and for adults. It's important that children continue to feel looked after and cared for.

It may help to involve other family members and friends in the care of the child/children in the weeks following the death, as this can be the time when the grief feels overwhelming.

CONNECTION

When an important family member dies, the whole family can feel fractured and incomplete. It's quite natural for everyone affected to want to withdraw for a while and it is at this time that children can feel lonely and disconnected from their grieving parent or carer. It's important that the child/children is able to still feel connected to the parent who has died and to their primary carer going forwards. They can be helped to do this in the practical ways listed below:

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CONNECTION (continued)

Specifically, they need:

- Adequate information about the death
- Their fears and anxieties listened to and addressed
- Reassurance that they are not to blame
- Careful listening
- Acknowledgement and acceptance of their feelings and grief
- A sense of safety in the world
- Respect for their own way of coping
- People who will guide and help them
- Help with overwhelming emotions and how to process and manage them
- Involvement and inclusion in rituals and anniversaries
- Opportunities to remember the person who has died

The death of a parent can shake the foundations of a child's belief in the world as a safe place. Children may need plenty of reassurance and encouragement to begin to feel safe again. Some children may worry about getting sick and dying themselves.



COMMUNICATING WITH A GRIEVING CHILD

Keeping communication open with children and young people can be the greatest challenge for a grieving parent or carer. Children may not necessarily wish to talk but they need to be able to express their grief and sadness if they want to do so.

Below are some practical suggestions to help with this:

- Talk about the person who has died and use their name
- Make a memory store / box and use this to store precious things that offer memories of the parent who has died
- Pool the available photos and make copies for all the children concerned
- Create an album of photographs and stories
- Keep a journal of memories
- Talk about things like: What was their favourite place? What was their favourite TV programme? What was their favourite food?
- Linking objects and special things – it can be important for children to have some of the special objects that belonged to their parent. These might be items of clothing, jewellery or other objects
- Make time to sit down and listen – children will talk when they are ready and usually in small bursts. These are precious windows to the child's understanding of what has happened
- Create special and unique rituals or remembrance activities

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WHEN CAN SUPPORT FROM BALLOONS HELP?

Children sometimes feel the need to protect their living parent, carers and other family members, fearing that they will bring further sadness if they express their own grief.

Sometimes children experience difficulties with processing grief and this is when support from a grief support worker can help them to make sense of their feelings.

The death of a parent can present a child with complex challenges, and they may find support to manage these challenges helpful. These challenges could include:

- Persistent difficulty talking about the parent who has died
- Aggressive behaviour and anger and a struggle to manage this anger
- Unexplained physical symptoms and discomfort; for example, stomach aches, headaches
- Sleeping difficulties
- Eating disturbance – eating excessively or having very little appetite
- Social withdrawal – not wanting to socialise with friends or others outside the family
- School difficulties - inability to concentrate or behavioural problems
- Persistent blame or guilt
- Self-destructive behaviour – engaging in at-risk behaviour, talking about wanting to hurt themselves.

Not all children will experience these challenges after the death of a parent, and some children won't experience any of these challenges. Nonetheless, talking to someone outside of the family network, who is trained in child grief, can be very constructive, offering the opportunity to talk about very difficult things in a safe and non-judgemental environment.

If you want to know more then please contact Balloons on 01392 982570

