

How to help your bereaved child

You may be bereaved yourself, and may be finding it hard to keep your child's needs in mind with all that is happening. The following points are a guide to help you focus on what is going on for them.

Don't be too hard on yourself

As a bereaved parent it is important that you also take care of yourself. Parenting is hard work, and parenting a bereaved child is even harder, especially if the person you would have looked to for support has died. If you explain this to them, your child will understand that you can't always get it right, and appreciate that you are trying. Children experience grief as much as adults do, but they express their feelings differently sometimes as they are still learning and developing.

What do your bereaved children need?

Involvement and information

Include your child in the family's grief and give them the information they need to understand what has happened and what is going to happen.

'We are all feeling very sad about your dad. I really wish he was here and get upset about it a lot, just like you do. It is normal to feel like that when someone we love has died.'

A close bereavement will mean big changes for your child. Things at home will be different, the people around will be behaving differently, routines will be disrupted. As a parent or carer, you cannot stop the changes, as you could not stop the person dying, but you can help your child by explaining what is happening as it happens.

'We will all have to do more around the house now, as we have to do the things that mummy always did.'

'I miss grandma very much and I know you miss her picking you up from school.'

Reassurance

Your child will need reassurance about themselves, other family members and things in general. Because one person close to them has died, this does not mean that others are going to die.

'It is very unusual for someone as young as your brother was to die of any sort of illness, most people live until they are old. Just because he died when he was young doesn't mean anyone else in the family is going to die.'

Your child needs to know that they will not feel the same as they do now forever.

'We are all going through a very difficult time at the moment. We all miss daddy so much and wish he was here. It won't always be like this though. We will never forget daddy but it won't always be so painful.'

Share your feelings with your children.

Children can understand that it is normal to get upset when someone you are close to dies, so it is ok to cry and show your feelings to them. They may not like it, but it is the way that they will learn that crying is something adults as well as children do when they are upset. Children can also understand that grief brings up a lot of difficult feelings.

'Sometimes I feel very angry and upset because mummy isn't here, and I do seem more cross with you. It isn't because you are more naughty than usual, I am upset that your mum isn't here.'

Tell them what is happening as it happens and they will learn about grief, and feel able to talk to you about their own feelings.

Consistency

Keep the same rules and ways of doing things as far as possible. Bereaved children live in a changed world, and need to know what has not changed and what they can rely on. It is very tempting to allow them to stay up late and to ease up on the usual rules. You may feel that you should not be so hard on them because they are bereaved, but children need the security of knowing that everything hasn't changed because of the death.

'I know it is hard and you miss your mum, but you do still have to go to school and that means going to bed on time so you get enough sleep.'

'It isn't fair and it does make you angry not to have a dad. I understand that feeling, but it isn't ok to take it out on your sister/ brother/friends.'

Ways to manage

Children need help with sorting out how to respond and to behave in the changed world they now live in. They appreciate the chance to talk through situations that may be difficult for them, and strategies for how to cope.

'Let's have a talk about what we should do as a family over Christmas. It won't be the same without your dad and we need to think about it a bit so we are prepared.'

'What do you want me to do about your new school, who shall we tell about your sister so you have someone you can go to if you feel upset?'

Help them to remember

Children sometimes worry that they will forget the person who has died as they grow up, and appreciate help to hold on to their memories.

'Shall we make a special book/box for your photos of daddy and the things that remind you of him which we can keep safely for you?'

Hope

Your children may need you to help them understand that how they feel now will not last forever; that good things can still happen and that it is ok for them to enjoy themselves and have fun.

'It is just great that you have been chosen to be in the team. Daddy would have been so proud, he would want you to feel really good about it.'

Help for you and your children

There are services offering help and support for you and your child in many parts of the UK. The contacts listed here are to start you off.

St Christopher's Candle Project offers individual and group counselling to bereaved children and families in south east London, and a phone helpline during office hours **0208 768 4500**.
www.stchristophers.org.uk

The Childhood Bereavement Network has a directory of services for bereaved parents and children in all parts of the UK.
www.cbn@ncb.org.uk
0207 843 6309

Winston's Wish has a website and a phone helpline www.winstonswish.org.uk
0845 2030405



St Christopher's Hospice
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children,
young people
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