



INFORMATION PACK FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Supporting a child facing the death of a loved one

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What does it mean for a child when someone they love is dying?

It is always difficult for children to cope when they have to deal with a parent who has a life limiting illness- it is a time of uncertainty and there is fear of the unknown as they deal with one of life's 'unplanned transitions'.

Children in this situation need the support of their family, their faith, their school and the wider community to help them with the current situation and prepare for what may potentially be the most traumatic experience they have ever faced.

The anticipatory death of someone important may cause a child or young person to feel some or all of the following:

Confusion trying to make sense of their family situation which can make it difficult for them to describe or connect to any feelings.

Anxiety about the safety and well-being of the rest of the family, especially their parent(s). This can be expressed by a child or young person not wanting to leave a parent to go into school, exhibiting separation anxiety or school refusal.

Loss of control family life is changing, roles and responsibilities within the family may be changing. This can be unsettling and frightening and may create a need to have control over other things that are within their reach.

Blame, guilt or shame for things said or unsaid, done or undone.

Sadness that may be expressed in a variety of ways (crying, anger, withdrawal, anxiety)

Physical and psychosomatic symptoms this could present as headaches, stomach aches or perhaps symptoms which reflect a worry that they may have the same illness.

Loneliness not knowing who to talk to, feeling different and alone.

Distracted they may have to become more responsible for instance, to be the 'man of the house' or to mother younger siblings, to be a young carer or generally to be 'no trouble and be very good'.

Disengaged difficulty or inability to consistently engage in schoolwork, activities, after school clubs, friendships.

Anger and even rage, at what is happening.

Grieving for what is being lost how family life has already changed and the loss of future plans or hopes, picking up on parents own grief and thus beginning their own grief process.

Ages and stages in understanding grief

The table below maps the development of children's understanding of death and how this is likely to impact upon their reactions to the anticipated death of someone close to them

Age	Thoughts	Feelings	Actions	Interventions
0–3 years			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cry ■ Cling ■ Exhibit regressive behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hold the child ■ Reassure calmly
3–5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Loved one will return; loved one is just away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Confused ■ Anxious ■ Fearful ■ Separation anxiety ■ Sad ■ Angry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cry ■ Temper tantrum ■ Nightmares ■ Regress ■ Cling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide extra attention ■ Reassure calmly
6–9 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Wonder if loved one can return ■ Believe deceased can still function ■ Believe their actions or words caused the death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Confused ■ Anxious ■ Fearful ■ Separation anxiety ■ Sad or angry ■ Fearful they might die too 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cry ■ Temper tantrum ■ Nightmares ■ Regress ■ Cling ■ Difficulty in concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide extra attention ■ Tell the truth appropriately ■ Reassure (not responsible for death) ■ Encourage physical or artistic expression of grief
9–12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Understand finality and irreversibility of death ■ Believe their actions or words caused the death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sad ■ Confused ■ Anxious ■ Withdrawn ■ Lonely ■ Guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Exhibit aggressive or impulsive behavior ■ Engage in risky or dangerous behavior ■ Obtain worse grades at school ■ Have difficulty concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide extra attention ■ Tell the truth appropriately ■ Reassure (not responsible for death) ■ Encourage physical or artistic expression of grief ■ Maintain structure, limits, and rules
12–18 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Understand finality, irreversibility, nonfunctionality of death ■ Believe their actions or words caused the death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sad ■ Confused ■ Anxious ■ Withdrawn ■ Lonely ■ Guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Exhibit aggressive or impulsive behavior ■ Engage in risky or dangerous behavior ■ Obtain worse grades at school ■ Have difficulty concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Seek community and school support ■ Maintain structure, limits, and rules ■ Encourage physical or artistic expressions of grief

Source: Reder.⁵⁰

How to support a child in the school setting

Contact with family

- Try to build a rapport with the family and have a contact for you to keep in touch with. Check in with this person and find out what information they have given and how much they have told the child; what words, phrases imagery have they used. It is important for the child to have consistency with their information.
- It is good to encourage the family to keep to normal routines. Sometimes school is the safe, consistent place for the child although the family may be struggling to get them there and pick them up—check this out with the family.

Talking with the child

- Use age appropriate language: always summarise and check the child's understanding of your conversations or when they have received new information—what have they heard and understood? Leave space for their questions.
- Always answer honestly and simply. Be honest if there is no answer or you just don't know, let them know you will try to find out and get back to them.
- Don't be afraid to discuss the topic of death with the child. Always allow the child to choose whether they want to talk. There is no wrong or right way for the child to be.
- Allocate one member of staff to the child so they know who they can speak to and how to access them.

In the classroom

- Learning may be affected - it can become hard to process information, they may often feel tired, withdrawn, anxious, emotional and overwhelmed.
- They may be worried about what might be happening at home to their loved one and these feelings may increase on arriving at school or towards home time.
- Try using strategies such as transitional objects like magnetic stones to help the child feel they remain connected to home or a specific person.
- Try to be as flexible as you can with the child, their concentration and behaviour may change from day to day. Accept that some things can't be made 'better' in a short space of time – be patient, be consistent, be available.

- Offer the child a 'time-out' card. It can be helpful for children to come out of class if they feel overwhelmed (especially during the illness or days and weeks after the death).
- It is important to maintain consistent boundaries but with understanding.
- Recognise that very powerful difficult feelings may underlie behaviour. Avoid phrases such as "What would your Dad say? Is this the way in which he would want you to behave?" as these add unnecessary pressure and could add to false guilt and shame.
- Changes in circumstances in the school (new teachers, timetables etc) and transitions into new classes or schools can be hard for children who are having to cope with many unwanted changes at home.
- It is important to be aware of anniversaries and days which might make this time more difficult for the child. For example, it would not be appropriate to give a reprimand for missing deadlines if family circumstances have changed suddenly such as a parent being admitted to hospital or hospice.

Look after yourself

Just do what you can when you can. Any attempt to offer your support or help will be appreciated by a family facing the loss of a loved one as well as those grieving.

Talking about death and supporting distressed children can be very emotionally demanding. Always reach out to your school's support systems or to organisations who can provide you with support to process some of these feelings and experiences if needed.

Developing a support plan

We know that facing the loss of a loved one can be a traumatic experience for a child/young person. It is therefore important to develop a support plan so that it is clear what support the school is providing, should the child need it. Involve the child in this process as much as possible, by asking what would be helpful and giving choices where possible.

What to consider in a support plan

Family

Communicate with the family to clarify what has been shared with the child about their loved one's illness and prognosis and what language has been used, all within the context of the family's cultural and religious beliefs.

Key person

Identify someone the child feels comfortable with. Someone who can be comfortable around the topic of dying and death. Someone the child has a positive relationship with.

Time out

This allows the child permission to leave class for a short time when they begin to feel out of control or just to get some "personal space" when upset. This could be agreed with the child/teacher to see what would work best for the individual child. For example - they could carry a "card" in their pocket or have an object on their desk and the child may leave the room without having to ask. It is important to let staff know about the procedure to avoid embarrassing scenes for either the child or the teacher. The child must know of a designated place and person to go to in these times, as they will not be allowed to wander the school.

Workload

There may be some days when the child may find it hard to think about anything other than the person who is dying, and they may find it difficult to focus on schoolwork. On these days, children may complete less work, and teachers may need to reduce their curriculum demands accordingly.

Attachment

Tangible items can be a real comfort for children facing the loss of a loved one. Carrying something small in their pocket is a discrete way to feel close to someone important (either the person who is ill or has died, or someone from home) to help manage separation anxiety. This could be a soft piece of fabric, a note, a pebble or gemstone.

1:1 support work

Offer support work to the child where needed. If this is not possible please contact the support worker from Jigsaw South East. Where there is an identified support worker in the school (ELSA, HSLW, Therapist) resources and information can be shared from Jigsaw South East.

Working individually with a child

Death and dying are not easy subjects for anyone and you may feel upset – do not be afraid to admit it as it can model the fact that difficult feelings are ok, and totally normal. Many children and young people tell us that they really appreciate and respect adults who are honest about their experiences and feelings. Every reaction will be unique.

The way in which a child reacts to loss is dependent on their relationship with the person who is dying, the child's development stage, the nature of the death/illness, the child's understanding of loss, their support network and what they have been told.

- Acknowledge the illness/death. You could say "I was really sorry to hear that your Dad is ill/ died last week, how are you feeling?"
- When talking to a child, use clear language. Avoid using phrases such as "your loss", "gone to sleep" or "gone to a better place" as this can frustrate older children and confuse younger ones. A six-year-old who hears that her Dad has been lost may try to find him, because that is what you do when someone is lost.
- Death and dying often throws up many questions for us all. If there are questions that you are unable to answer, acknowledge the question and reassure them that you will look into providing an answer at a later point. It's ok to not know.
- Ask the child how they feel and acknowledge those feelings.
- Be prepared for children to move in and out of grief (puddle-jumping).
- Although children can appear to be getting on with things outwardly and seem to be unaffected, this does not mean they don't need access to ongoing support.
- Try to normalise the feelings that the child shares with you. They may be worried that they are the only person who has ever felt this way. Reassure them that feelings of anger, fatigue, fear, worry, stress, sadness, exhaustion, guilt, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, lack of focus etc are all ok to express.
- A non-directive approach will allow the child to choose whether they want to talk about it or not. Respect the child's process as there is more than one way to grieve. Every interaction is an intervention.

Following a bereavement

- Activate your Bereavement Policy
- Child Bereavement UK have created a suggested framework for developing a Bereavement Policy : [Link](#)
- Here is an example of a school bereavement policy (with permission): [St Thomas' School Bereavement Policy](#)
- Communicate with the family and the child to see how/if/when they would like information to be shared and with whom.
- A sample letter that you could use to communicate news of a bereavement can be found in the resources at the end of this document

Support around funerals

If the family you are supporting need advice or guidance around the funeral, these are some issues to consider:

- Talk to the family and get as much information as you can about the day and how they are planning for it to run.
- Establish the family's views and the child's wishes on whether they will be attending this funeral.
- Find out what the child knows about a funeral and if they have ever attended one before.
- See what their understanding is of key aspects: the coffin, cremation, burial, ashes, hearse etc. Work out beforehand how you are going to explain these things using language that is age appropriate and you and the family are comfortable with.
- Go through the running order; what will happen that day using details for example letting them know that the coffin will be carried in and will be placed at the front of the church whilst the service happens.
- Play them the music that they will hear in the service (or suggest this to the family).
- Can the child play a part? Help choose the music, flowers, write a poem, read a story, choose a photograph. They may want to put something in the coffin with the person such as a drawing, letter, photo etc but it is important that they know they will not get this back and it will be put in before the funeral happens.
- It is important that they feel part of it regardless of whether they are attending. Be mindful that children may change their mind, repeatedly, and may need reassurance.
- Suggest that there is a close friend of the family that can be seated by the door and if the child feels they need to leave they can take them, this way the family does not need to leave the funeral but the child knows there is a plan in case they need to. Talk this through with them.

- Talk about the emotions they may feel or see other people expressing on the day and how they can cope with this. For example, a child seeing a close family member in distress/sobbing can be overwhelming for a child so preparing them for unexpected displays of emotion can be helpful.
- Allow the child time to think these things through and come back with questions if they have any. Give them time to think about what they might like to do.
- For some children, it may be useful to visit the church or crematorium, so they are not going to an unknown place. Funeral directors and ministers are usually very happy for this to happen.
- For some, viewing the body helps them realise their loved one has really died. Encourage the family to talk about this and prepare the child for what it may be like.
- There are books you can use to help with the imagery of a funeral and prompt this conversation. (see appendix)
- Link to an information page from CBUK on explaining funerals, burials and cremation to children: [*Explaining Funerals, burials and cremations*](#)

Resources

Communicating news of a bereavement (example letter)

Dear Parents and Carers,

I am writing to you today with some incredibly sad news and I am looking for the support of all families who are part of the school community.

*Recently (*) was taken ill and her health rapidly declined with the illness that had been identified. Since this initial diagnosis (*) spent time in the hospital with medical staff trying to ascertain the best course of action to move forward. In the past month * was admitted to the Hospice to continue her care. It is with great sadness that (*) died on ??/??/??.*

*Like me your thoughts will be focussed on her children (**) and her family. I know you will join with all of us at the school in sending your condolences and best wishes to the family and recognise that they are seeking support from the sources they need at this very difficult time.*

*The family are taking each day as it comes, with (* , *) best interests at the heart of these decisions. It is important to know that both (*) and (*) could return to school tomorrow. With this in mind, today I have spoken to the Year 3 and Year 6 children about what has happened and how they can best care for their friends when they come back to school. At this time the children know the very small amount of detail required to understand the seriousness of this life changing event for their friends, but I am sure you will want to listen to their thoughts and questions too.*

*I have asked the Year 3 and 6 children to think about the needs of (*) and (*) at this time and they have been given clear strategies to help them make sure school is a supportive place that helps everyone come to terms with what has happened whilst respecting the privacy of the family.*

I would like to thank you all for taking the time to read this letter and for making time to discuss this sad news with your children. I am sure they will have lots of questions.

*Thank you also for making sure your children understand how important it is to let (*) and (*) make their own decisions about how they communicate their thoughts and feelings to the people around them.*

For now, no matter who we are, which faith we follow or how well we knew them our thoughts, prayers and best wishes go to the children and their family

Kind regards

Head Teacher

(Kindly shared by Mr Tow – Broadfield Primary Academy, Crawley)

Suggested reading for preparing for loss/pre-bereavement books

As Big As It Gets: Supporting a Child When a Parent is Seriously Ill, Stokes, J.

Crossley, D. and Stubbs, D. 2007, Winston's Wish. This book provides a range of ideas for parents and carers so that they feel able to involve their children in what is happening. The book also includes some suggestions about what parents might say to children and how to offer support.

When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness. Children Can Learn To Cope With Loss

And Change. Marge Heegaard. 1991, Woodland Press. This workbook will help families communicate and evaluate a child's understanding and feelings about family change while teaching basic concepts of illness and healthy coping skills.

When Something Terrible Happens Marge Heegaard 1991, Woodland Press A workbook to help children work out feelings about a traumatic event.

Helping Children to Cope with Change, Stress and Anxiety: a Photocopiable Activities

Book. Plummer, D. and Harper, A. 2010, Jessica Kingsley Publishers. This book is full of creative ideas for use with children who have difficulty in coping with change, stress and normal levels of anxiety. Supported by a comprehensive but accessible theory section, the practical exercises are a simple and fun way of helping children to learn healthy stress management strategies. Deborah Plummer offers over 100 activities and games specifically aimed at helping children to build emotional resilience. With a mixture of short, snappy activities and longer guided visualizations, these exercises are suitable for use with individuals or groups, and many are appropriate for use with children with complex needs or speech and language difficulties.

Cancer. Kirsten Lamb. 2004, White-Thomson Publishing Ltd. For children and young people. This book aims to give a realistic picture of cancer. It explains how cancer occurs when cells multiply out of control. It gives information about all the common cancers: possible causes, symptoms, diagnosis and treatments. There is advice on reducing your risk of cancer, and a look at how the disease affects family life. Throughout, case studies are used to show how cancer affects real people.

The Secret C (Straight Talking About Cancer) Stokes, J. 2000, Winston's Wish. When a family member is diagnosed with cancer, it can be difficult explaining to children what cancer is and how it will affect the family. The Secret C: Straight Talking About Cancer aims to support families with this task and uses illustrations and straightforward language to give a basic explanation of what cancer is, the treatments involved, and how it might affect the person living with cancer. Feelings are also addressed and reassured. The book also reinforces the importance of trying to keep as close to the usual family routines as possible and still being able to laugh and have fun. Aimed at children 7-10 years old.

When Your Mum or Dad Has Cancer. Couldrick, A. 1991, Sobell Publications. Suitable for children 7 and upwards

Mummy's Lump. Gillian Forrest & Sarah Garson 2008, Breast Cancer Care. A book aimed at the under-sixes. Mummy's Lump follows Elly and Jack as they learn of their mother's diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer.

Macmillan Information Booklets Many more can be found and ordered via the website: Macmillan.org.uk

- *Talking To Children And Teenagers When An Adult Has Cancer*
- *A Guide for Young People Looking After Someone With Cancer*
- *Preparing A Child For Loss*
- *When Someone With Cancer Is Dying*
- *End Of Life - The Facts*

Nurse Ted: A Children's Guide To Terminal Illness Ffion Jones & Kerry Hyde 2018, Belrose Books

Nurse Ted: A Children's Guide To Cancer. Ffion Jones & Kerry Foster-Mitchell. 2016, Belrose Books

Nurse Ted: A Children's Guide To Brain Tumours. Ffion Jones & Kerry Foster-Mitchell. 2015, Belrose Books

A Dragon in Your Heart Sophie Le Blanc. 1999, Jessica Kingsley Publishers. How do you explain to a five year old that her mother has breast cancer? A short, explanatory book of a few sentences, a few drawings simply put together to explain the situation as clearly as possible.

The Rainbow Feelings of Cancer - A Book for Children Who Have a Loved One with Cancer Carrie Martin and Chia Martin. 2002, Hohm Press. When Chia Martin was diagnosed with cancer, she found her daughter Carrie's artwork a catalyst to their communication. This beautiful, heart-warming book features Carrie's art and writing about the emotions evoked by her mother's illness. Children need to share their feelings and ask questions, especially in stressful times -- and this book subtly and warmly encourages conversation between children and those who love them.

Can I still Kiss you? Answering Your Children's questions about Cancer (2001). Neil Russell

Dear Mum, From You To Me (Journal Of A Life Time) 2007, From You To Me. A book to share memories and experiences. Also available in **Dear Dad**, **Dear Grandma** and **Dear Grandad**

The Invisible String . Patrice, K. and Stevenson, G. 2000 by DeVorss & Company. A story that teaches of the tie that really binds: the Invisible String reaches from heart to heart. This delightful book illustrates a new way to cope with something all children and parents confront sooner or later; a child's fear of loneliness and separation. Here is a warm and delightful lesson teaching young and old that we aren't ever really alone. (YouTube)

No Matter What. Debi Gliori 1999. Bloomsbury Children's Books

Gentle Willow A Story For Children About Dying Joyce C Mills 2004, Magination Press. A comforting story about a tender-spirited tree and her friends in the forest, addressing feelings of sadness, love, disbelief and anger.

Saying Goodbye To Hare: A story to prepare a child for the death of someone special. Lee, C.2014, Southgate Publishers. For ages 5-9

Big Tree is Sick. Nathalie Slosse & Rocio Del Moral. 2017. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. A storybook that helps children cope with the serious illness of a loved one.

Michael Rosen's Sad Book Rosen, M. 2011 Walker. A book for children about Michael's sadness over his son's death, how it affects him and things he does to try and cope with it.

When Dinosaurs Die - Laurie Krasney Brown and Marc Brown (1998) Little, Brown

An explanation about death and frequently asked questions. (YouTube)

Lifetimes: Beautiful Way to Explain Life and Death. Mellonie, B. and Ingpen, R. 1997, Belitha Press. A book which aims to help parents and teachers explore the subjects of life and death with young children. An honest and beautiful book in helping to explore the challenging issues surrounding death, loss and change in life. (YouTube)

Waterbugs and Dragonflies: explaining death to young children. Doris Stickney (2002) Continuum International. This book uses the analogy of a water bug transforming into a dragonfly to illustrate the idea of life after death. Written from a Christian viewpoint, children may need an adult to help understand the relevance of the story.

Everybody Feels...Scared, Everybody Feels... Sad , Everybody Feels... Angry Jane Bingham 2014, QEB Publishing

How Are You Feeling Today? Molly Potter and Sarah Jennings 2014 Featherstone Education

The Colour Monster: a story about emotions. Anna Llenas (2019)

The Huge Bag Of Worries. Virginia Ironside. 2011, Hodder Children's Books (YouTube)

You've Got Dragons. Cave, K. and Maland, N. 2003, Peachtree publishers. A book about managing worries and fears. (YouTube)

Key Stage 1 (5-7)

Sad isn't Bad: A Good-Grief Guidance for Kids Dealing with Loss- Michaelene Mundy (1998) Abbey Press. Realistic and looks at loss offering comforting ways for children to cope.

Always and forever - A Durant (2004) Picture Corgi. Moving and sensitive story about a fox dying gently explaining death.

I Miss You - A first look at death. Pat Thomas (2009) Wayland. Exploring the difficult issue of death, funerals and saying goodbye in a gentle way. (YouTube)

The day the sea went out and never came back (2003) Margot Sunderland. A story for children who have lost someone they love.

The Lonely Tree - Nicholas Halliday (2008) Halliday Books A moving and beautifully illustrated story about the life cycle of an Oak tree. (YouTube)

Badger's Parting Gifts- Susan Varley (1994) Picture Lions
A story of animals learning to remember their friend.

Death is Stupid (2016) Anastasia Higginbotham. This book is a lovely book if a child is expressing some anger about death.(You tube)

Key Stage 2 (7-11)

Milly's Bug-nut- Jill Janney (2002) *Winston's Wish* A short story of Milly, whose father has died, and the way her family finds through bereavement. She knows that when people die they can't come back, but she keeps a wish to see her Dad one more time.

A Child's Grief Diana Crossley and Julie Stokes (2001) *Winston's Wish* This information booklet for adults supporting children through bereavement covers a variety of issues which may affect a child and offers practical suggestions and activities.

You Just Don't Understand – Supporting Bereaved Teenagers 2013 *Winston's Wish*

Straight Talk About Death For Teenagers – how to cope with losing someone you love
Earl A. Grollman 1993 Beacon Press

Workbooks

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine - *Winston's Wish* and Kate Shepherd (2000) *Winston's Wish*. A range of fun and thoughtful; creative activities and exercises for bereaved children.

Grief Encounter Workbook - Shelley Gilbert (2003) *Grief Encounter Project*. A workbook to encourage conversations about death and bereavement between bereaved children and adults.

When someone very special dies - Marge Heegaard (1991) *Fairview Press*. For children and adults to use together to talk about general concepts of death and loss, as well as around a particular bereavement.

Useful websites

Child Bereavement UK <http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/>

Child Line <http://www.childline.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx>

Childhood Bereavement Network www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support <http://www.macmillan.org.uk>

Mind <http://www.mind.org.uk/>

Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org

2021 Created by Caroline Duckworth, Janice Poplett and Philomena Lydon of the Preparing for Loss service, Jigsaw (South East)