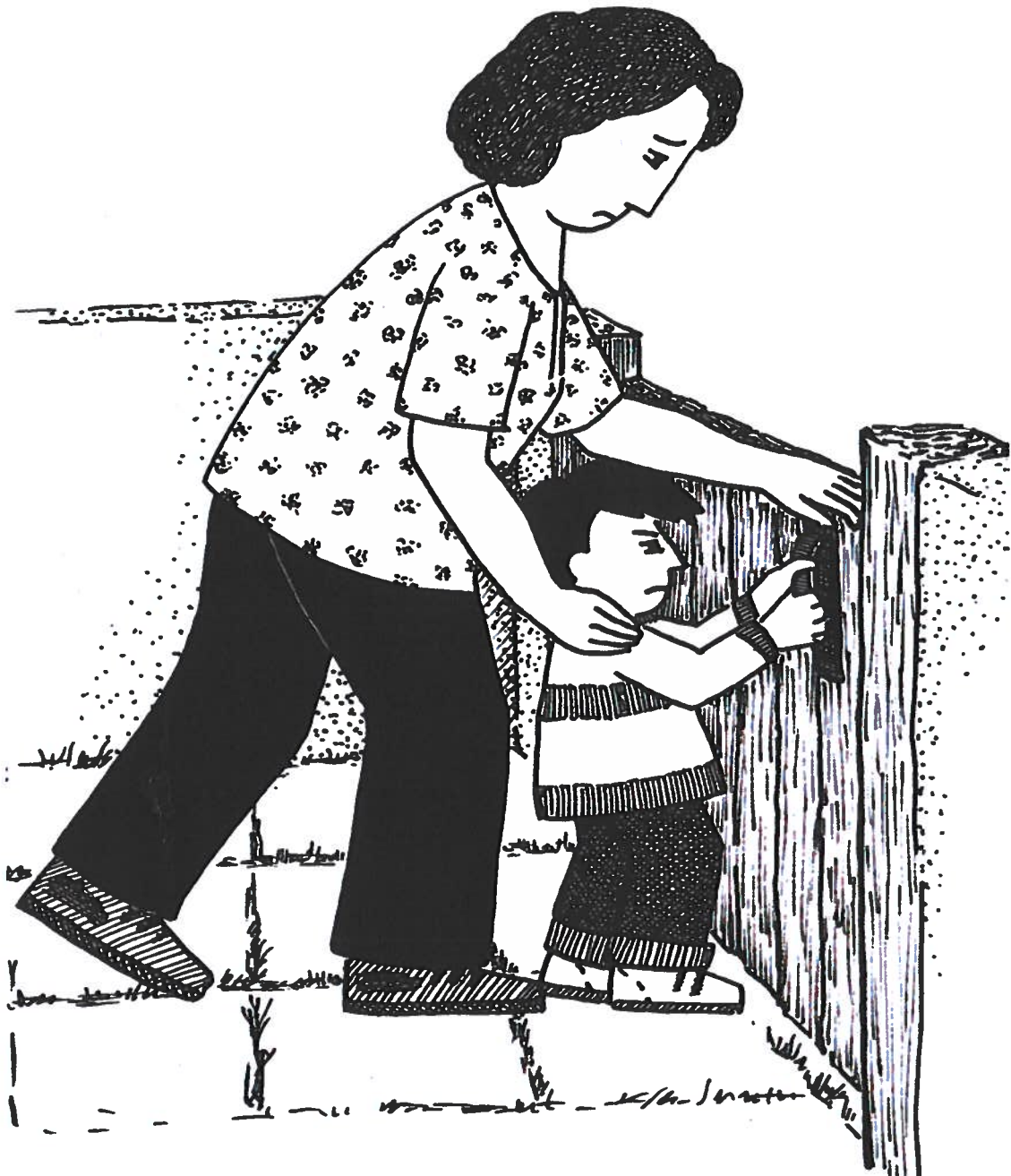


# "Not too Young to Grieve"

*Adapted by Barnardo's from Childhood  
Bereavement Network UK*

# 1. Children need adequate information.



2. Children need their fears and anxieties addressed- small worries also!





3. Children need to be reassured that they are not to blame. Nothing we say or do causes someone else to die.

4. Children need you to  
watch and listen to them  
carefully.



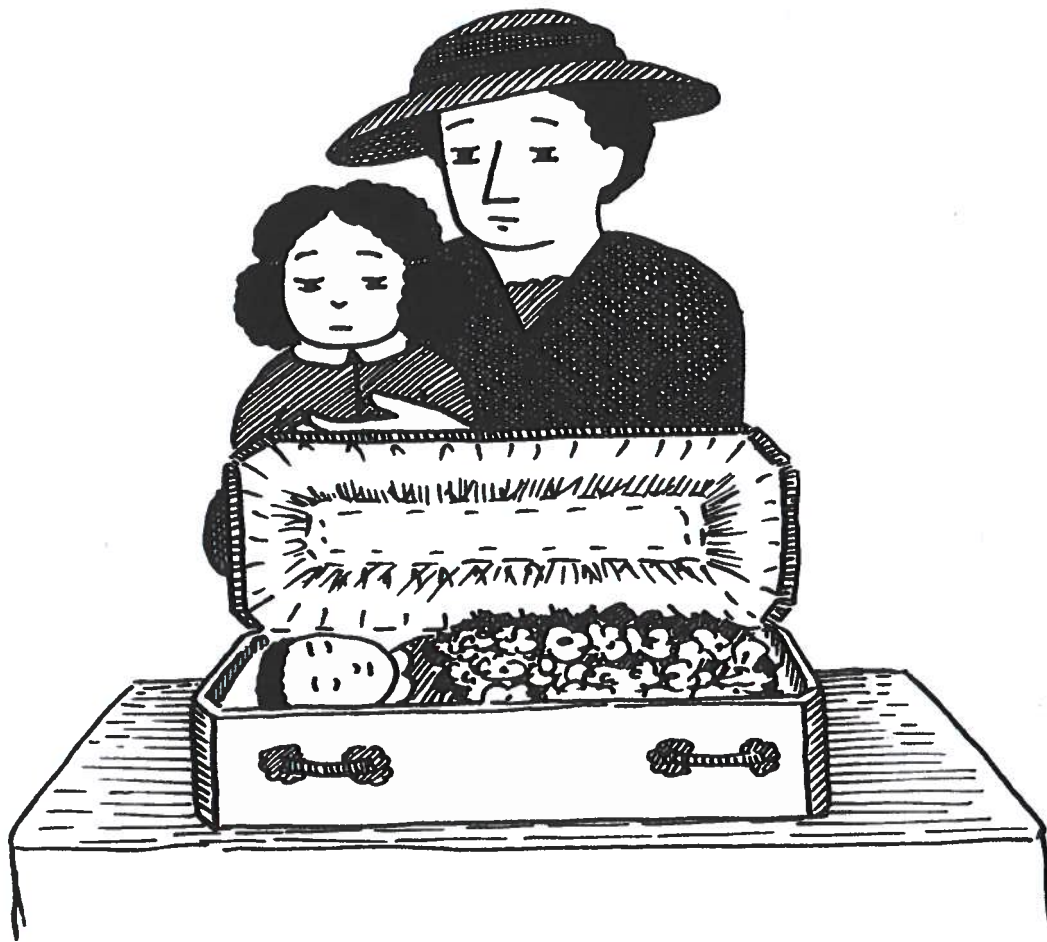


5. Children need to know their feelings are accepted. It is okay to cry.



6. Children need help with  
overwhelming feelings.

## 7. Children need to be included and involved.





8. Children need to carry on with their routine.

## 9. Children need to see other people grieving.





10. Children need opportunities to remember.

## **Frequently asked Questions:**

### **Introduction**

There are no definitive “right” answers to these questions. They help think about what to expect with children experiencing bereavement.

#### **(a) How do you explain what “dead” means to a young child?**

- Young children need repeated age appropriate information.
- It may take years for full comprehension to develop.
- Use the words “dead” and “died” rather than words like “gone to sleep”, or “lost”.
- Give a simple explanation of the cause of death and how that prevents the body from working.
- Explain that someone who has died does not eat or drink, nor feel pain. They have not gone away, so they can’t come back to life.
- Seeing a creature that is dead helps understanding more than words. Even seeing a dead insect and noticing the differences from a live insect can help.
- In many cultures it is expected that children will be able to see the dead body, to help them understand what has happened.

**(b) What should I do in the immediate aftermath of a death, to help a child or their carer? Should I say anything, or send a card?**

- This is a significant event in a child's life and we need to acknowledge it. Just saying something like "I am very sorry to hear your mummy has died" is important. It helps the child to know that you are aware of the death.
- A card or note to a carer acknowledges this loss and may give you the opportunity to offer help.
- Talk to colleagues about who needs to know about the death and how you will share this information.

**(c) How can we include children in the ceremonies surrounding death?**

- Some families will follow fixed or traditional practices or customs following a death. Children benefit from a clear explanation of what is going to happen.
- Even quite young children can contribute to a funeral or memorial, for example, by choosing flowers, a piece of music, drawing a picture or choosing a favourite toy to bring with them.
- Sometimes if a child has not been directly involved in the funeral (or was not able to understand it), the family could hold a child-friendly ceremony to remember and say good-bye.

**(d) What can we do to stop children blaming themselves or others unrealistically?**

- Make sure you use simple and unambiguous words to explain the cause of death. In many cases words such as “there is nothing anyone (or we) could have done to stop Daddy dying” are helpful.
- Pay attention to what a child says or does, including in any role play, so that you can reassure them if they show signs of guilt or regret about things they have done.
- Remind them of positive things they did for the person who died. For example, “Your sister loved playing hide and seek with you”.
- If a close family member or carer has a terminal illness it is helpful to give some advance warning that they are seriously ill.

**(e) When a child who has been bereaved is behaving badly, how should we respond?**

- Make sure that you do not label a child “bad” because of particular behaviours. Noticing when, where and with whom a child behaves in a certain way will help you to find ways of responding appropriately.
- It is generally helpful to keep consistent boundaries. Knowing there are limits helps children feel more secure.
- Whilst still keeping boundaries, it is helpful to acknowledge feelings that may be being expressed. “I can see that you are very angry; it is OK to be angry, but not OK to punch me”.
- It is quite common for children to be less capable and appear to go backwards for a time following bereavement. Concentration and other abilities may not be at the level they were before, especially if a child feels anxious or afraid.
- Addressing the needs of the child (for instance, for information, reassurance and security) may help to address the underlying cause of difficult behaviour.

### **For how long will children grieve?**

- A significant bereavement will be part of a child's experience for the rest of their life.
- Certain events, reminders or anniversaries are likely to trigger feelings and thoughts about the dead person.
- Children go in and out of grief. This is true both over the short and longer term. Directly following a bereavement they may move in and out of grief feelings from moment to moment.
- As they grow and develop they may re-visit a death with their new awareness and understanding. This may trigger new feelings of grief.
- Studies have shown that children are affected by bereavement for a long time. The Harvard Bereavement study reported that a significant proportion of the children showed more emotional distress two years after a death, than immediately following their bereavement.

### **(g) Should staff share their own feelings with children? How can staff support each other?**

- Children learn from others. Often it is through adults talking about thoughts and feelings that children make sense of their own experience.
- In supporting a child we need to focus on their experience rather than our own. However it is important to acknowledge your own feelings, especially where they also recognise a child's loss e.g. "I feel sad when I think about your mummy dying".
- Talking about your own experience of loss in age appropriate language can be very helpful to a young child.

- All staff that work with a bereaved child need to be informed as quickly and clearly as possible about a death.
- In supporting staff it is important to respect individual differences. Some may need the opportunity to talk; others may prefer to cope by getting involved in other activities or focussing on the needs of the children. It is valuable to acknowledge the impact bereavement may have on the staff.
- Some time at staff meetings can be given to acknowledge the impact of a death and to address any issues and questions that have arisen.

**(h) How can we help children to remember and make sense of the life of the person who has died?**

- Talk naturally about the person who died.
- Photographs are invaluable reminders of the life of the person who died. Some families find that creating a memory box for each bereaved child is helpful.
- A child is likely to be interested in two different aspects of their life: their relationship with the child and what they were like as a person. For example, if a parent has died, anyone who knew them will be able to share stories about their earlier life. For instance, "I remember when I first saw your mummy holding you" or "I remember going to the park with your daddy when we were your age".
- If you acknowledge anniversaries and other significant events (e.g. Mother's Day) you will provide opportunities for the child to remember and make sense of their loss.

**(i) How are other young children likely to react when one of their peers is bereaved? Why do young children sometimes react by bullying a child whose mother or father has died?**

- They may react in a whole host of ways. Some common reactions are fear, disbelief, not understanding, anger and sympathy.
- The information they are given should include some guidance about how to be with the bereaved child. This can make a significant difference to behaviour.
- Bullying often comes about from fear and lack of understanding or knowledge. Children find it frightening to think that someone so significant can die. They may blame the bereaved child for their own uncomfortable feelings.
- Children sometimes use 'difference' as a cue to bully. Bereaved children's own behaviour may add to the perceived difference. On occasion they may also exhibit angry and aggressive behaviour which may trigger reprisals.

**(j) What should we do about mother's day and father's day? Are there any other significant celebrations where we need to be especially thoughtful about a bereaved child's experience?**

- Openly acknowledge the anniversary, recognising that if a father or mother has died these days may highlight the loss.
- If an activity has been planned, give the child a choice about taking part, and in what way. In many cases a child will be pleased to make a card for a deceased parent, perhaps placing this on a grave or other special place.
- Other days are child, family and culture specific. Birthdays, religious festivals, visits or meetings with people that have a particular

connection to the deceased may all trigger stronger feelings of loss. All these occasions also provide opportunities to remember the person who has died and honour the importance of their relationship.

- Having acknowledged someone's absence it can be helpful to give a clear message that it is OK for children to have fun. For instance, "mum would really want you to enjoy your birthday".

### **(k) Should we talk about heaven?**

- We need to be aware that young children may not be able to clearly understand any explanation of death whether spiritual or physical in nature. Their understanding will increase as they get older.
- It is important to make sure that religious or spiritual explanations do not create fears through misunderstandings. For instance, a child may be frightened that someone ("Jesus") can come and take them away.
- For many children and families it is natural and important to talk about heaven or another form of afterlife. It is important to acknowledge and respect this part of a child's reality.
- In a secular setting, it may be appropriate to reflect on a range of beliefs, e.g. "Some people believe..., other people think..." or to allow the child to talk about their own beliefs.
- Children will often say they want to go to heaven and see the person who has died. This is usually a natural expression of the desire to be with this person. Saying something like, "You wish that you could see mummy now, and it is very sad that you can't" helps to acknowledge the child's feelings and the reality of loss.

**(l) What do you say if a parent has died not from illness but from suicide, murder, drug abuse or a preventable accident?**

- We may naturally want to protect children from difficult and traumatic events but pretending that they have not happened does not help in the long run. Even if you tried to keep information secret, children will often overhear or pick up on other people's thoughts and feelings about a traumatic death.
- We want to avoid overloading the child with too much information at once, but at the same time we need to be open and honest.
- Sometimes it may be appropriate for a child to learn the whole story about a death over a long period of time, as they develop and grow. When a death occurs it is important that children see some of the pieces of the jigsaw. Over time they will be given more pieces so that eventually they can see the whole picture.
- Sometimes we may doubt a child's story about a death because it shocks us or does not seem to make sense. Initially accept their version of events, then if unsure check with an adult in case they are confused.
- If there is a great deal of anger in the family about a death, then some understanding of who or what the anger is directed at helps a child to know that they are not being blamed.

**(m) How can we help bereaved babies and very young children to feel more secure?**

- Respond to the basic need for physical holding.

- Provide as much that is familiar as possible. Storybooks, a piece of clothing from the person who died or perfume may all provide comfort.
- Provide as much continuity of care and carer as possible.
- Give children adequate age appropriate information.
- Provide activities which are relaxing and soothing, e.g. sand and water play, massage, music, and ones which allow children to “let off steam”, e.g. running, jumping and dancing.

**(n) How do you help a child while they are adjusting to a new home or carer?**

- Be sensitive to the impact of the change; pay close attention to how the child is responding.
- Acknowledge the reality of the change by talking about differences e.g. “Going to bed is different now because you share a room with Jo”.
- Where possible allow the child some choice. Even being given small choices (“Which duvet cover do you want?”) helps to give a sense of some personal control.
- Find out about familiar routines and keep as many as possible.
- Allow the child to take their time to adjust; allow them to express negative feelings about the change, including towards new carers in their lives.
- This situation may be one where a professional setting – playschool, nursery or a child minder – may provide valuable continuity and familiarity.

**(o) What physical symptoms of illness might a child have, as a result of a bereavement?**

- First, if a child displays any physical symptoms it is important to treat them medically. Make sure that any illness or underlying physical cause has been treated or ruled out.
- Grief and other strong emotional pain hurts. Sometimes it hurts physically – places that many people feel this pain are in the throat, chest, stomach and head.
- A child may worry that they could have the same illness as the person who died, and they may echo symptoms of the illness. This may be to seek reassurance that they will be OK.
- Sometimes being physically hurt may provide the opportunity to cry or release other feelings. Children may on occasion deliberately fall over for this release and/or because they need attention.

