

Talking to Children about Death - *A guide for parents and carers*

Children need information, reassurance, involvement and the opportunity to express feelings. They need to know what has happened and to be told the truth. If at all possible it is preferable that information comes from you. Children can overhear conversations and become confused and anxious, this anxiety can make them reluctant to ask questions, they may then use their imagination compounding their confusion.



Help them recognise that death is a natural part of life and to appreciate that some things in life can never be fully explained. Also that grown-ups do not always have the answers (e.g. if God is good, why do bad things happen?). Remember it is not always necessary or possible to have all the answers.

Use straightforward words like dead and dying, using a word such as loss may lead children to think that the person is wandering around somewhere unable to find their way home. It may also lead them to think that the person can be found.

Talking to a child about death does not make things worse, ignoring it can be isolating for the bereaved child.

It is important to be open and honest with children at an age appropriate level, you may find it helpful to refer to the 'Responses of Different Age Groups' fact sheet which gives information about the way children of different ages may understand death and bereavement.

Listen to your child and encourage them to talk. Even very young children can understand that someone important is missing and need to have this explained to them.

Help them to understand that it is OK to cry and to show difficult feelings. Help them to find ways of doing this that are not disruptive or destructive, they may

express feelings through difficult behaviour and probably at times when you feel least able to cope with it.

It can be positive to share your grief with them, as long as you don't expect them to look after you as much as you look after them. Remember that their experience of bereavement may differ from yours, this does not mean that one of you is right and the other wrong.



Responses of different age groups

* Pre-school children

Whilst babies are too young to understand what is happening they will:

- Pick up on the emotional distress and moods of those around them
- Be aware of and unsettled by changes to their routine

Toddlers & small children may:

- Ask very direct questions
- Keep asking the same questions to try to make sense of their confusion
- Have disrupted eating & sleeping patterns
- Regress in their behaviour for a period of time
- Express their feelings through their play

* Primary School children

Children in this age group may:

- Not want to be separated from their main carer
- Think that something they said or did caused the person to become ill
- Regress in their behaviour for a period of time
- Find it hard to concentrate at school / fall out with friends
- Have difficulty getting to sleep / interrupted sleep / nightmares
- Develop physical complaints e.g. tummy-aches & head-aches

* Secondary School children

Teenagers may:

- Find it difficult to talk about their feelings
- Want to deal with things on their own or with their friends
- Think they need to appear strong for others
- Want to stay at home more so they know what is happening
- Want to stay out more to forget what is happening
- Feel the pressure to take on an adult role
- Regress in their behaviour
- Become very angry
- Develop school-related difficulties e.g. find it hard to concentrate, become disruptive