



## Educational Psychology Services

### COVID-19 Support

# Bereavement Support for Children and Young People: A Guide for Parents and Carers

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#### Introduction

The aim of this guide is to offer advice to parents and carers about how you can support your child if someone they know or a loved one becomes seriously ill or dies with COVID-19 (or suspected COVID-19).

#### Talking to your child about somebody who is seriously ill with COVID-19

Telling children that someone is seriously ill, is a very difficult conversation to have. It is natural for us to want to protect our children from such distressing news. However children can often tell that something is not right, especially with COVID-19 which has been in the media so much. Not giving children clear information about what is happening can make them feel more frightened and confused. If a loved one is unwell with COVID-19 (or what we think might be COVID-19), it can help to talk to your child about this.

All children are different and as a parent or carer you know your child best and so you are the best person to decide when to have this conversation and how to share the news. How to break the news to your child will depend on a number of factors such as your child's age and level of understanding, and the individual circumstances around the person's illness. Here are some suggestions for how to talk to your child about this:

- Update yourself on the current information on COVID-19 from trusted sources such as the NHS and Government websites (links at the bottom),

- Find the right time and place to have the conversation,
- Inform your child that the person they know is ill with COVID-19 (you may have to go over this information lots of times while your child takes it in, especially if they are a loved one),
- Allow your child to ask questions, explain to them what this illness is and how it could progress based on information from trusted sources,
- Listen to your child's worries and tell them that it is normal for them to feel worried,
- Explain to your child that some people only have mild symptoms, that most people recover from the illness but that unfortunately, some will die,
- Don't make promises that the person will definitely get better,
- Express your hope that they will get better and tell them about what is being done to help them get better,
- Tell your child what you and other loved ones are doing to stay safe, as well as what they can do to stay safe (e.g. hand-washing),
- You might give older children all the information you have in one go, but younger children may need small amounts of information given to them over days, weeks or longer,
- It's ok to not have all of the answers to your child's questions and tell them you don't know
- When more information is available to you, decide how much detail to share as appropriate to your child
- Keep reassuring and soothing your child in the coming days and weeks.

### Children and young people's reactions of grief following a death

Children can experience a mix of different feelings at different times when they experience a death. Some of the emotions they may experience include: anger, sadness, guilt, fear and shock. The way a child grieves can look very different to how adults grieve. For example, children can seem really upset about the death and soon after, appear happy or talk about other things before experiencing sadness again. They jump in and out of their grief and this is normal but can be confusing for adults. The way children respond to death is different for each child based on their age and level of understanding.

- **Up to 2 years old:** Children at this age typically don't understand death but do experience loss and separation. They might cry, withdraw or search for loved one who has died.
- **2 – 3 years old:** Children at this age may believe that the person who has died can be brought back to life. They may blame themselves, repeatedly ask what has happened or act out the death with their toys.

- **6 – 9 years old:** Children at this age start to understand that the person who has died can't come back. They may start to have nightmares about death and may be curious about what happens to the body. The child might withdraw, become angry or aggressive, or complain of headaches or tummy aches.
- **10 – 13 years old:** Children at this age are aware that death is final. When grieving, they might struggle to interact with their friends and may be more dependent on their family for support. They might have big emotional reactions and may think about the long-term consequences of the death.
- **Adolescents:** Young people at this age may start to question what the point is of doing various things. They might try to keep busy to push away their feelings, they may express anger or withdraw. The young person may try to take on adult responsibilities and try to hide their emotions to protect the adults around them.

This is just a guide and your child may not fit neatly into it so judge what you think is appropriate for their stage of development.

It is common for children who experience the death of someone that they know to feel worried that the same thing might happen to other loved ones. With COVID-19, this worry may be even more intense because many people have caught the virus.

There is a helpful video on the Winston's Wish website that you could watch with your child, to help them understand feelings of grief (see below for the link).

### Informing your child of the death of someone due to COVID-19

Informing children of the death of someone they know is never an easy task, and it may be even harder for children to cope with in the current situation because the decline in a person's health can be sudden with COVID-19. The child may not have been able to be close to the person with the virus in the days leading to their death, or because they are socially distancing from those who could support them (e.g. friends, other family and teachers). They may not be able to go to the funeral to say goodbye and may not be able to switch off from the situation because they aren't going to school or to social activities outside the house.

In breaking the news to your child, you could say something along the lines of:

*"I have some very sad news to share with you. Remember we spoke about how [Name] was ill with coronavirus and the doctors and nurses were doing everything they could to help make them better? Unfortunately, even though everyone tried their best, the illness was too much for [Name]'s body to cope with and he/she has died."*

Again, how exactly this news is delivered depends on the child's age and understanding. To support your child through this:

- Use simple language that your child can understand, to explain what has happened,
- Say that the person has ‘died’ and avoid phrases such as ‘we lost Nan’, ‘Nan is in a better place’ or ‘Nan is asleep and won’t wake up’ because this can be confusing and frightening for children.
- Check your child has understood what you’ve said.

### Supporting your child following the news

As parents and carers you may be experiencing your own grief which is upsetting you and it may feel harder to support your child. It is ok to reach out to others to help you so that you can support your child. Even though schools are closed you should still be able to make contact with school staff who can support you. It may also be a good idea to use technology to socially connect with others as this is vitally important for you and your child. Looking after yourself means that you will better able to support others. Do not grieve alone; you will need the comfort of friends and family.

- Reassure your child that this is not their fault. Sometimes children can start to think that they are to blame for a death.
- Listen to your child’s worries and feelings and answer their questions honestly, as best you can. If you think the answer is too upsetting for them to hear, tell them you feel that way.
- Don’t feel that you have to hide your own emotions.
- Encourage your child to share their happy memories of the loved one and share your own,
- Keep your child informed about what is happening (e.g. funeral arrangements etc.)
- Reassure your child about everything you and other loved ones are doing to keep healthy and safe and remind them that most people only have mild symptoms and will recover (it is natural to worry that others will become ill with the virus and die),
- Remind your child of what they can do to keep healthy and safe according to official advice (see the NHS and government websites for more information)
- Allow your child to express their feelings through drawing, writing or other creative activities if they wish,
- Have routines in place (e.g. the same dinner time and bed time each day) to help to make things feel more normal for your child,
- Ensure they stay connected to their friends and family (older children especially prefer to talk with others)

- It is ok to allow more time for activities they enjoy such as reading, gaming or playing (as long as they are also encouraged to talk and think about their feelings)

### Funerals and memorials

Different cultures and faiths have rituals around death and funerals which it may not be possible to observe. If you are worried about this you should connect with a faith leader or your community to support you. Families may have different beliefs and views about whether their child can or should attend a funeral. It is helpful to ask the child whether they want to go to the funeral or not, after explaining what they can expect to happen there. Sometimes, children want to go, to say goodbye and share their love, however the situation with COVID-19 means that some children may not have the option to go even if they want to, due to restrictions on who can attend. Your child may feel very upset at not being able to go to the funeral.

If your child is not able to attend the funeral, the following may help them to say goodbye in a different way:

- Explain to your child that the funeral will be different because of the situation with COVID-19 but will still be meaningful. Explain how it will be done instead.
- Suggest that your child write a card, or choose an important object to be placed next to their loved one at the funeral.
- Your child could write a poem or tribute for somebody to read out at the funeral.
- Involve your child in planning the funeral, such as choosing the music or the flowers.
- Hold a service at home on the day of the funeral.
- Collect and share happy memories as a family and make a memory box.
- Somebody who did attend the funeral (yourself, a family member or a funeral director) could describe some of the detail as children tend to ask about these things.
- Remembering the loved one on an important date such as their birthday or the anniversary of their death. This might be by visiting their grave or the place where their ashes were scattered.

If your child is allowed to attend the funeral and wants to, it is helpful to prepare them, by giving them clear information about what will happen at the funeral. Reassure them that it's ok if they see other adults upset because this is a normal reaction. Make sure your child knows that they can change their mind about going to the funeral and can still say goodbye in other ways.

## Supporting your child weeks and months after the death

Children will differ in how long it takes them to work through their grief and continue with everyday life. Grief never completely leaves us and there will be times, even years later, when the emotions may resurface. They may find anniversaries and other key dates difficult. It is normal for the process of grieving to take some time, however, if after a few weeks you are worried that your child is still experiencing intense emotions and has difficulty getting on with normal life you can contact the organisations listed below for advice and support or talk to your GP or school staff.

### Organisations offering support and websites with further information:

- **The Child and Adolescent Bereavement Service (CABS), Northampton General Hospital:** Offering bereavement advice by phone to parents on 01604 545131, Monday to Friday.
- **Winston's Wish:** Offering advice on supporting a bereaved child or young person. Tel: 08088 020 021, Monday to Friday, 9.00am – 5.00pm. Alternatively, email [ask@winstonswish.org](mailto:ask@winstonswish.org). There is also an online chat facility available on the website ([www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)) and a Crisis Messenger service available 24/7 for urgent support (Text WW to 85258). There is also lots of useful information and resources on the website.
- **Cruse Bereavement Care:** Website include further information for parents and carers <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents> and there is a helpline: 0808 808 1677 open Monday-Friday 9.30am – 5.00pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when they are open until 8pm.
- **Child Bereavement UK:** Offers information and guidance to families. Tel 0800 02 888 40, Monday – Friday, 9.00am – 5.00pm. Alternatively, visit the website to access Live Chat <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/> or email [support@childbereavementuk.org](mailto:support@childbereavementuk.org)
- **Young Minds Parents Helpline:** <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/>: Available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25. Tel: 0808 802 5544, Monday - Friday, 9:30am – 4.00pm.
- **#help2makesense** website: Offers information and support to young people <https://help2makesense.org/>
- **Hope Again** website: Offers information and support to young people. Young people can email a trained volunteer on [hopeagain@cruse.org.uk](mailto:hopeagain@cruse.org.uk) or can call 0808 808 1677 free, Monday - Friday, 9:30am - 5:00pm.

- **The Mix website:** Offers information and support to young people under 25 years old via telephone (0808 808 4994, open daily, 4.00pm – 11.00pm), email or webchat <https://www.themix.org.uk/>
- **NHS website:** Offers information and advice on COVID-19: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
- **Government website:** Offers information and advice on COVID-19: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>
- **Video on how to answer children’s questions about a bereavement:** <https://www.winstonswish.org/how-to-answer-difficult-questions-about-a-bereavement/>
- **Northamptonshire Educational Psychology Service website:** Offers further guidance and information around how to support children and young people in the context of COVID-19 including adult self-care: [Northamptonshire Educational Psychology Service \(EPS\)](#)

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help

observe

consult

assess

focus

advise

encourage

develop

appreciate

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