



How to support children who are grieving – guidance from Child Bereavement UK

The pandemic has dominated the news for more than a year and most children will have some awareness of the level of bereavement around them. For children who are bereaved, for whatever reason, it's been a particularly challenging time. Limitations on attending school, meeting with friends, being able to say goodbye to someone who has died or is dying, or accessing the support of extended family, will have made things particularly difficult.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has made grieving complicated. However, it's important to recognise that grieving is a completely normal response to death. With sensitive support and care from family, friends and school, most children will not need professional help.

One of the most important things an adult can do to support a bereaved child is to be honest and open. Yet, when someone dies, adults often feel the need to protect children from the truth. Children, however, are very good at sensing when adults are avoiding their questions, and anything you don't tell them, they may make up. Give your child honest, factual information, appropriate to their age and understanding.

Younger children can be very literal, so it is best to avoid terms such as 'gone to the stars', 'lost' or 'passed away', which can be confusing. You may need to repeat information as children process what you have told them; be prepared for them to ask you the same question over and over again. If you don't know the answer to any of their questions, don't be afraid to say so and to tell them that that you'll let them know if you find out.

Keeping to regular routines is a good way of making a child feel secure when everything around them feels different and out of control. Unfortunately, many of the activities and patterns of life children are used to, have been disrupted by the pandemic. However, try to encourage them to get plenty of sleep and to keep to regular routines such as mealtimes, doing schoolwork, speaking to friends in whatever way is safe or permitted, and taking exercise.

It can also help to involve a child in planning a funeral or other ceremony, even if restrictions mean they cannot attend in person. Perhaps ask if they would like to do a drawing to be placed in the coffin, or if they have a favourite song or poem they would like included in the service.

Children can feel overwhelmed by strong emotions and find it difficult to put how they feel into words. Doing a workbook together, making a memory jar or going for a walk

can be useful ways to cope with pressure and allow a child space to express how they feel, or to talk about anything that is upsetting or confusing them.

Let your child know that it is normal to feel angry when someone has died, particularly as the pandemic has made it difficult to visit people or say goodbye in the way you might have wished. Safe ways to release this anger such as bashing a cushion or going outside to let off steam can be helpful, but let them know that it's not OK to hurt themselves or anyone else.

Ultimately, a grieving child needs you to be a role model and not a hero. It's OK to show sadness and to say that you are also frustrated by the way the pandemic is affecting the way you can grieve. If you are open, you will encourage your child to share their feelings too.

If you are struggling with your own reactions, try to get support for yourself. Children and young people are quick to pick up on the distress of others around them, even if the adults are trying to hide their feelings.

For confidential support, information and guidance for individuals, families and professionals, call Child Bereavement UK's Helpline on 0800 02 888 40, access LiveChat via www.childbereavementuk.org or email: support@childbereavementuk.org (9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday, except Bank Holidays).