



# Supporting bereaved children

a guide for parents and carers

Supporting bereaved children: a guide for parents and carers

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*Image: front cover*

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Experiencing the death of someone you love is like being parachuted into a strange land where you have no map and don't know the language. Finding your own way can be very hard work for bereaved adults – it can be doubly hard if you are also trying to help a child through their loss and grief.

Even if you are feeling overwhelmed by your own grief, you are one of the best resources your child has.

Bereaved children need acknowledgement, understanding and holding, both physically and emotionally. Whatever your role in a bereaved child's life, you can help him or her to express their sorrow by offering support, encouragement and practical help.

This booklet is intended to help you understand some of the ways in which bereavement can affect children and how you may be able to help them.

The booklet covers:

- children's grief
- what bereaved children say
- how you can help your child
- how Cruse can help you and your child.

At the end of the booklet we also suggest some useful resources and websites for bereaved children and young people and anyone supporting them.

## Children's grief

Children experience the same sorts of feelings as adults when someone they love dies. They may feel desolate, despairing, insecure, angry, afraid, alone – and much more. However, they often express their feelings differently.

How they behave and how they understand what death means depends on their age and developmental stage.

The list (right) describes how children and young people typically understand and react to death.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is important that children should feel able to grieve in their own way and their own time. They may not grieve constantly – children's developing brains are less able to maintain intense focus for long periods; they need to play and have fun as well as cry. This doesn't mean they don't care or they have 'got over it'; it simply means that they need time out from thinking and feeling so intensely.

Age	What death means	Possible reactions
0–2 years	The child has no concept of death, separation or despair.	They may search constantly for the person who has died. They may become clingy and afraid of strangers. They may have sleeping difficulties and refuse food.
2–5 years	The child will find it hard to believe death is permanent. They may feel they have caused the person's death. They may use magical thinking (make up fantasies) to fill the gaps in their understanding of what has happened.	The child may become afraid of separation and of being abandoned. They may protest loudly if left alone. They may feel despair. They may protest at changes to their usual routine. They may find it hard to sleep. They may revert to 'babyish' behaviours.
5–11 years	The child will have more experience of death, and more understanding of what it is and that it is permanent.	They may become withdrawn. They may appear sad, depressed and lonely. They may have anger outbursts, temper tantrums and nightmares. They may feel guilty. They may have behaviour problems.

Age	What death means	Possible reactions
5–11 years (cont...)		<p>They may struggle socially and academically at school.</p> <p>They may become preoccupied with death.</p> <p>They may go to the other extreme and become extremely good and well-behaved and appear very brave and self-controlled.</p>
Young people	<p>Young people aged 11 and upwards understand that death is permanent. However they may use denial to help them cope with the finality of bereavement – it can't/hasn't happened.</p>	<p>Young people may become withdrawn, depressed and sad.</p> <p>They may cut off from their friends.</p> <p>They may respond with anger and rejection, or with jokes and sarcasm.</p> <p>They may become dependent again, or regress to behaviours they have long ago grown out of.</p> <p>They may experience insecurity and low self-esteem, which can lead to bullying in school and difficulties coping with schoolwork.</p>

“To ‘companion’ bereaved children means to be an active participant in their healing... You allow yourself to learn from their experiences. You make the commitment to walk with them as they journey through grief.”

**Alan Wolfelt**

Wolfelt A (1996). *Healing the bereaved child: grief gardening, growth through grief, and other touchstones for caregivers*. London/New York: Routledge.

## What bereaved children say

These are some of the things bereaved children and young people have told us they need from the people around them.

- **Answer my questions** – be honest, clear and factual. Use words like ‘dead’ or ‘death’ rather than ‘left us’ or ‘gone to a better place’. Ask the child what they think has happened, so you can sort out any misunderstandings or confusion.
- **Help me understand** – explain that the dead person can never come back and why. Try to reassure the child that the death was not their fault. You may need to answer the same questions lots of times – this is the child’s way of checking that the person really has died and nothing has changed.
- **Let me take part** – let the child choose if they want to be involved in the funeral and any other commemorative rituals. Explain to them what will happen, so they can decide for themselves if they want to attend.
- **Reassure me** – children may need extra reassurance that they are still loved amid all the sadness and loss. They need to know you are still there for them too, even though this important person in all your lives has died. Routine can be reassuring, so try to keep to their usual meal times and bed times if possible.
- **Let me alone** – children may need quiet times on their own. Don’t fuss around them if they want to be alone.
- **Let me talk** – don’t try to make a child talk about their feelings. Let them talk in their own time and at their own pace. Give them space to express their feelings – they may be frightened by the intensity of their emotions (or by their lack of emotion), so reassure them that bereaved people often feel this way.
- **Help me remember** – children may find it helpful to express how they feel through play, writing or drawing. You could help them collect a memory book or box, with photos and special mementos of the person who has died.

- **Help me get back to school** – school is an important part of a child's daily routine, so encourage them to go back when they feel ready. Tell the school about the bereavement. Ask your child who should be told and how. Make sure there is someone your child can talk to in school if they need to – a friend, their class teacher, another member of the school staff.
- **Be there for me** – children need to know there are people around whom they can trust and who are there if they need help. Family members, neighbours and teachers can all provide a listening ear.
- **Help me find other sources of help** – children often try to protect their grieving parent and other family members by hiding their own grief. They may feel guilty about needing support. Suggest other people who could provide a sanctuary outside the family, where they can grieve without feeling guilty.

## How you can help your child

### **Look after yourself**

The first thing you can do for your child is look after yourself. If you are also bereaved, it can be very difficult to cope with your own feelings and your child's distress. Sometimes it's just impossible, so...

### **Find other sources of help and support**

Don't try to manage it all on your own. Ask other family members and people you trust to spend time with your child(ren) and make sure your child(ren) know there are other people there for them too. Give yourself a break – get away from the children from time to time. It will help you cope better when you are with them so you can...

### **Be strong**

Your child needs to believe you are strong enough to hear whatever they want to talk about and to answer their questions. And when you answer their questions...

### **Be honest, clear and factual**

Children want facts. They want the truth. If you tell them what has happened, however traumatic and terrible, it will help them begin to accept the reality of death and cope with

their pain and loss. It won't protect your child not to know the truth. Children know when things aren't right or when people aren't telling them the truth. They can hear silences and not knowing the facts will only confuse and possibly frighten them.

## DO

- Do be honest and show your grief – it gives your child permission to do so.
- Do let them know you love them and will be there for them.
- Do keep to your usual family routines as far as possible.
- Do look after yourself.
- Do listen to them and answer questions – they need to know their feelings are important.
- Do help them remember the person who died.
- Do take things one day at a time.

## DON'T

- Don't try to hide your own pain. It is alright to cry in front of your child – but try not to overwhelm them.
- Don't tell your child not to worry or be sad. They may feel they are not allowed to express their feelings.
- Don't feel that you have to have all the answers or get it right all the time.
- Don't be surprised by a child's ability to laugh and play amid their grief. Play allows them to express their feelings and manage their anxieties about events that feel outside their control.
- Don't worry too much about clinging or aggressive behaviour or physical health problems – they may be an expression of your child's grief.



## How Cruse can help you

Cruse provides free, confidential bereavement support to adults, children and young people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our trained volunteers offer one-to-one, confidential support, whether you need to talk about your own grief or about how to help your child(ren).

You can arrange to meet a bereavement volunteer from your local branch of Cruse or you can talk to someone on our national telephone helpline: **0844 477 9400**

You can get find details of your local branch from the national helpline and on our website: **[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)**

We also have a range of booklets and information about bereavement and how to help your child. A full list is available from **0208 939 9530** or email **[info@cruse.org.uk](mailto:info@cruse.org.uk)** or visit our website.

Our online bookshop has many books about bereavement and helping bereaved children and young people, as well as books written specially for children and young people. You can find this on our website.

## How Cruse can help your child

Cruse can offer your child expert one-to-one support from a trained and experienced bereavement volunteer, at home or in another setting such as school – wherever it is easiest for them.

**Cruse has a national helpline just for children:  
0808 808 1677**

We also have a special website just for children and young people, where they can share their experiences of bereavement and find information about bereavement and how to get help: **[www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)**

The website has lots of messages from young people describing how they have coped with bereavement. The site is secure and moderated, so children and young people can post messages safely. Children tell us it really helps to talk to other young people who have been bereaved.

## Other sources of help

[www.barnardos.org.uk/  
childbereavementservice](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/childbereavementservice)

### **Child Bereavement Charity**

Provides support and information for families who have experienced the death of a child and for bereaved children. They also provide training for schools and other professionals who work with bereaved families and children.

Helpline: 01494 446 648  
[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

### **Childhood Bereavement Network**

A national federation of organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people. Services include education and information, advocacy and signposting to sources of support.

Tel: 020 7843 6309  
[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

### **The Child Death Helpline**

A national freephone helpline established by the Alder Centre in Liverpool and Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust. The helpline is staffed by trained volunteers who are all bereaved parents.

Freephone helpline: 0800 282 986  
Admin: 020 7813 8416 / 0151 252 5391  
[www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk](http://www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk)

### **Childline**

A free, confidential, national helpline for children and young people.

Tel: 0800 1111  
[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### **Contact**

Offers face-to-face counselling to young people aged 11–25 in Northern Ireland, in community and post-primary education settings.

Tel: 028 9074 4499  
[www.contactni.com](http://www.contactni.com)

### **Compassionate Friends**

A national organisation of bereaved parents offering friendship and support to other bereaved parents who have lost a child at any age and from any cause, and to their immediate families.

National helpline: 0845 123 2304  
Northern Ireland helpline: 0288 77 88 016

### **Parentline Plus**

A national helpline for anyone in a parenting role.

Tel: 0808 800 2222  
[www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

### **Winston's Wish**

A national charity providing practical support and guidance to families, professionals and anyone concerned about a grieving child.

Helpline: 0845 203 0405  
[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)



## How Cruse helps bereaved people

Cruse Bereavement Care is the leading national charity providing bereavement support services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provide advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever and however the death has occurred.

Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. We have a national helpline and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We also have a website and freephone helpline specifically for children and young people. Our services are provided by trained volunteers and are confidential and free.

## Cruse books and publications

Cruse Bereavement Care stocks a wide range of books, leaflets and resources on bereavement. Please visit our website at [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk) or telephone **0208 939 9530** email [info@cruse.org.uk](mailto:info@cruse.org.uk)

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Cruse Wales  
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Telephone **029 2088 6913**

Our national helpline freephone number is  
**0808 808 1677**  
Website [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Children and young people's website  
[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

Cruse relies on donations to fund our work.  
If you would like to support us, please contact  
Cruse central office at the address above,  
or visit our website [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)