

## **Bereavement support for children and families**

### **Children's understanding of and reactions to death**[Target audience: parents, carers and school staff]

Remember these are general statements of how children understand death. They serve as guidance only and every child might respond differently

#### **4-6 Years (Early Years and Key Stage 1)**

##### Understanding of death

- Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality.
- Some may expect the dead person to reappear –“shall we dig granny up now?”
- They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as “gone away” or “gone to sleep”.
- Repeated explanations of what has happened may be required.

##### Some grief reactions to death

- Responses are varied.
- Outward signs are not always evident, but this doesn't mean that the child isn't grieving.
- May have difficulty in expressing feelings in words.
- They may yearn for the dead person, demonstrating anger and protest when they don't return.
- They may feel that it was partly their fault.
- Their behaviour may regress – becoming clingy and demanding more attention.
- Child might become frightened of going to sleep alone or in the dark.
- Babyish language, temper tantrums and bed-wetting may also increase.
- They are prone to fantasize at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something scarier than reality.
- When first told, they may not understand and may ask inappropriate questions

##### Ways of helping your child

- Gently repeat the fact that the dead person will not return
- Maintain daily routines
- Maintain boundaries
- Be patient with 'accidents'
- Answer his/her questions honestly
- Do not protect him/her 'because he/she doesn't understand'

## 7-10 Years (Key Stage 2)

### Understanding of death

- Most children realise that dead people are different from those that are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink.
- By seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone.
- They are aware that death is permanent and that the dead person won't return.
- They know that death can come about through illness or an accident.
- They are more able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected.
- They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust.
- They may at times use 'magical' thinking (the dead person watching or talking to them) to create stories around the bereavement.
- They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.
- They begin to be aware of the feelings of others and to show empathy to those also affected by the loss.

### Some grief reactions to death

- They can show many of the grief reactions of younger children; crying, bed wetting, eating and sleeping problems.
- They may become very irritable or aggressive towards other children and adults, or may become clingy.
- They may become fearful that the same thing might happen to them or others close to them and this could result in them not wanting to leave home or be apart from remaining family members.
- They may develop psychosomatic illnesses; headaches, feeling sick.
- School attendance may be disrupted.
- Self-esteem and self-confidence may be affected.
- Social peer pressures may limit their ability to express their feelings.
- They may appear as though everything is fine – brave and in control.
- May become preoccupied with death.

### Ways of helping your child

- Give matter of fact information about manner of death and demonstrate the child was in no way responsible.
- Provide opportunities for the child to talk with parents or other adults and give permission for the expression of feelings through variety of means.
- Maintain daily routines.
- Maintain boundaries.
- Make sure school knows as much as possible. Try to find out how the issue is being handled.

## **11+ (Upper Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 & 4**

### Understanding of death

- At this age children's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts.
- The need to know details continues and may seek answers to very specific questions.
- The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving.
- Death increases anxieties about the future, They may question the meaning of life and experience depression.
- Teenagers may find it easier to discuss their feelings with a sympathetic friend or adult than close family member.
- They may be having difficulty coming to terms with their own mortality and that of those close to them and cope by refusing to contemplate the possibility of death by experimenting with risk taking behaviour.

### Some grief reactions to death

- Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression.
- Anger and rejection.
- Joking, sarcasm.
- Dependence or regressing to younger age.
- Insecurity, low self-esteem.
- Bullying or being bullied
- Self-harm, eating disorders
- Ways of helping your child

### Ways of helping your child

- Maintain daily routines
- Ensure boundaries
- Beware of loading adult responsibilities on an adolescent
- Support outside the family can be important

For further help and advice please contact Helen Brown (Diocesan RE and Catholic Life Adviser)

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