

Supporting children and young people when someone dies



**Marie
Curie**

Practical and emotional help

Introduction

It can feel difficult to know how to support a child or young person when an adult close to them dies. Whether they were a parent, grandparent, family friend or someone else, you might be thinking about the best things to say to help the child, and what you can do to support them.

This booklet is for any adult who is trying to support a child when someone close to them has died. It provides information on how you can talk to the child about death and gives an overview of how children grieve and what you can do to support them during this time.

In this booklet, we talk about children and young people. This means anyone up to the age of 18, except in some sections where we mention things which might happen at specific ages.

If you don't feel ready to read this booklet yet, you might decide to come back to it another time. You might want someone to look at it with you, so you have their support. You could ask a nurse, bereavement counsellor, social worker, family member or friend.

If you would like to speak to someone, call the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309*** or visit mariecurie.org/support for more information.

* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

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How do I tell a child someone has died?

Having conversations about death with a child can be difficult. You might be worried about how much they will understand or how they will react. But speaking honestly can help them to feel supported.

Talking about death

Here are some things which may be helpful when talking about death. You can use these when telling the child that someone has died, or in later conversations about the person's death.

Be honest

Children need to know what happened to the person that died. Try to explain in clear, simple language that's right for their age and level of experience. You can also try giving them information in small amounts at a time, especially with young children, as this can help them understand. It's helpful to spend some time speaking about what you've told them, to check they've understood what you said. Once you've explained that someone has died, the details can follow.

Use plain language

It is clearer to say someone has died than to use euphemisms. Avoid explanations such as the person has 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away'. They may be confusing for the child, or might make them frightened to go to sleep or worry when you leave the house that you might not come back.

Encourage questions

Be prepared for a child to be curious and to ask the same questions again and again. This can be distressing, but it's a part of their need for reassurance and can help them process the information.

Reassure them

It's common for children to worry that the person has died as a result of something they may have said or done. Explain simply how and why they're not to blame. It might be helpful to give an example, like saying the person died because their heart stopped working. Reassure them that nothing that anyone said or did caused this to happen.

Ask them to tell their story

To protect children, adults sometimes try to avoid talking about the person who's died. But the child may want to talk about the person. They may need to tell their story. They had a relationship with the person who died and that relationship was important to them.

Listening to them can help you understand what they know about what happened. You can also explain anything they've misunderstood. Listening will also help you understand how the child's feeling. Avoid telling them what you think they should feel. Let them know that the feelings they may be having are OK, including ones that they may feel bad about, such as relief that the person has died.

Ask for help

When you're helping a bereaved child, take things one day at a time. If at any time you feel unable to cope, remember that you don't have to go it alone. Friends, family, healthcare professionals, teachers at the child's school and others can all help. There are child bereavement services that you can use (see page 45), and there is information on looking after yourself on page 39.

You may be able to get support through a local hospice, including Marie Curie Hospices. Some have counsellors and other professionals who can support children and young people. This is usually only available if the person who died was known to the hospice, but it can vary.

You can find out if there is a hospice near you on the Hospice UK website, [hospiceuk.org](https://www.hospiceuk.org)

Child Bereavement UK (see page 45) also has useful information for explaining death to children.



Tips on talking about death

Here are some tips that may help you talk about death:

- When they ask a question, you could start by asking: "What do you think?" Then you can build your answer on their understanding of what's happened.
- Try to avoid telling the child not to worry or be sad. It's normal that they should get attached to people. And, like adults, they might find it hard to control their feelings. You might find that the child doesn't seem to be sad. Sometimes they need time to absorb what's happened.
- Don't try to hide your pain, either – it's alright to cry in front of the child. It can help to let them know why you're crying. You might want to say to them that people cry for many reasons, and sometimes they cry to express their pain or sadness when someone close to them dies. Let them know that it's also OK not to cry, if that's how they feel.
- Be sure to give the child plenty of reassurance. Let them know they're loved and that there are still people who will be there for them. A cuddle can make a big difference and make them feel cared for.

Can talking about death help a child?

Adults often want to protect children by not telling them what's going on. But children may notice that something's wrong and might feel anxious and confused if they aren't told the person has died. They might prefer to know, even if it's sad, rather than trying to cope with not knowing.

Talking to a child about death can help them feel better supported and more secure. They may have fears or questions that they're worried about bringing up. Talking about death might make them feel more comfortable to ask these questions, and they might feel more able to talk about their feelings. If they see adults showing their feelings, they may feel more willing to open up about their own.

If they're not told about the person's death, they may start to make up their own explanation of why the person isn't around anymore. Not knowing the cause of the person's death might make them feel guilty that they somehow caused it. They may also start to worry that they could 'catch' the illness, if they don't have enough information about it.

Worries you might have

You may be worried about talking to a child about someone close to them who has died. You may worry that you will frighten them or say the wrong thing.

You may be struggling with your own feelings, and find it difficult to support the child. Or, you might feel like you want to protect them by not telling them.

Try to be kind to yourself if you do feel this way – it is normal to find conversations like these difficult. There are some things you can try on page 8 which could help you with the conversation. You can also get support with the conversation from other people (see page 7).

“Talking about death was difficult, it's not anything I've really had to do before. Our family were very open with her and I think it was the right thing. I took my cue from them. I was very aware of being sensitive and not telling her stuff she didn't need to know.”

Gemma, who helped her 10-year-old cousin when her grandfather died.

How does grief affect children?

Children, more than adults, swing quickly between grieving and getting on with their normal lives. They can be upset one minute and asking to play football or have some ice cream the next. It can be so quick that it's sometimes called 'puddle jumping' – the puddle is their feelings of grief, and they move quickly in and out of the puddle.

When you tell them the person's died, they might not react very much. You may even wonder if they've understood. It may take a while to process the news and they may not have the words to express their feelings. You can say you know it's a huge piece of news and you're ready to talk whenever they like.



Philip Hardman/Marie Currie

How does grief affect children?

A child's understanding will depend on many things, including their age, stage of development, family background, personality and previous experience of death. Children don't develop at the same rate – they're all individuals. Two children from the same family of the same age may react very differently to a death. You know the individual child best and will be able to adapt what you say to suit them. Be led by what they want to know and don't be afraid to tell them if you don't know the answer to something.

They may come back to the subject and ask you the same questions several times. Or they may try not to talk about the person if they think it upsets you. You can reassure them that it's OK to talk and much better than keeping their worries to themselves.

Young children often have 'magical thinking', where they believe their own thoughts can influence events. They might think that something they did, like being naughty, caused the person's death. They may want a friend or family member to come back and find it difficult to think it might not happen.

“Our granddaughter was only three when my husband died. He helped look after her and they were very close. She's older now but she still sometimes gets upset remembering him.”

Jennie, family member

How children understand and react to death

Birth to six months

Understanding of death

- No understanding of death, but will notice if their main caregiver (eg mum or dad) is absent.

Common reactions

- Feeding and sleeping difficulties, crying, worried.

Six months to two years

Understanding of death

- No understanding of death, but will be very upset if their main caregiver is absent.
- At two, children start to notice the absence of other people, eg a familiar grandparent.

Common reactions

- Loud crying, inconsolable.
- Angry about changes to their daily routine.
- Sleep problems and tummy aches.
- Looking for the person and asking where they are.

Two to five years

Understanding of death

- May talk about death but don't understand it and think that it's reversible. May ask questions, such as: 'if grandma's in the ground, how does she breathe?'
- Believe in 'magical thinking' and may think they are directly responsible for the death.

Common reactions

- Ask the same questions repeatedly.
- Need reassurance that you're not going to die too, and that death is not their fault.
- Clingy behaviour and behaving inappropriately for their age.

Five to ten years

Understanding of death

- At age seven, most children understand that death is permanent and inevitable. Some may take longer than this.
- As they're aware of death, they may worry that you or others may die too.
- They may be fascinated by what happens when someone dies.
- They can show compassion for someone who's bereaved.
- They may worry about the effect on you if they're sad and try to hide their feelings.

Common reactions

- Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness.
- Getting angry more often, difficulty concentrating at school.
- Regressive behaviour.
- Trying to be brave and control things.

Adolescents

Understanding of death

- They normally have a better understanding of death and can think about the long-term impact it will have on their lives.
- They may worry more about changes to the routine, like who will take care of them or look after the house. They might worry about things like finances or the future.

Common reactions

- Finding it difficult to talk about their feelings or wanting to talk to friends rather than adults.
- Feeling sadness, anger or guilt. Their emotions may be quite intense.
- Feeling worse about themselves.
- Wishing it hadn't happened, or wondering why it had to happen to them.
- Changes in how well they do at school or work.
- Worrying they might develop the illness which the person died of (especially if they were related).

“When my grandma passed away, my brain couldn't process it like my brother could. He was able to grieve for short periods and then play. Then he would continue to dip in and out over many months, whereas I couldn't rationalise the situation at all.”

Tyler, 14, who has Asperger Syndrome

Changes in behaviour

Children may not have words for how they feel, but you can watch for changes in their behaviour, which could be their way of expressing feelings they can't talk about. These could include:

- **Clinginess.** Refusing to be left behind and clinging to you can be a sign the child needs reassurance you aren't going to die and leave them too.
- **Distance.** Some children can put up a barrier with other members of the family because they're scared of getting hurt again. They may feel overwhelmed and want some space. They might want to spend more time away from home, with friends or at school.
- **Aggression.** This may be the child's way of expressing helplessness in the face of loss.
- **Regression.** Acting younger than their age can be a sign of insecurity. Young children may start wetting or soiling themselves, or wanting a long-forgotten bottle or dummy.
- **Lack of concentration.** The child may find it hard to concentrate at school and fall behind with their work.
- **Sleep problems.** Children may find it hard to sleep and become afraid of the dark.
- **Trying too hard.** Young children believe their behaviour can influence events. They might think if they behave really well and do things such as eating broccoli and cleaning out the hamster cage their mum might come back to life.

“Clodagh became more wary and became much more aware of the emotions of everyone around her. She was more clingy. She had that fear of walking out and someone not being there when she got back.”

Gemma, who helped her 10-year-old cousin when her grandfather died.

These are natural reactions and they will pass. However, if you have any concerns, there are people out there you can talk to – see page 45 for a list of useful organisations.

Changes in behaviour for adolescents

Teenagers who are grieving might experience changes in their behaviour too. These can include:

- **Aggression.** They may be struggling to manage their strong emotions, so end up acting out or being angry.
- **Regression.** They might start to act more childish, as a way of feeling more secure.
- **Acting the adult.** They may be worried about the future now the person has died, so they might feel like they need to take on a more grown-up role.
- **Distance.** They might bottle up their feelings and want to avoid talking about it. Or, they may prefer to speak to their friends about their emotions, rather than an adult.

These feelings are normal. But if you're worried about a young person, you may want to speak to a social worker or counsellor. There are also organisations which provide support for teenagers who are grieving (see page 45).

Supporting a child who's grieving

There are a number of things you could do to help support a child when they're dealing with grief:

- Try talking openly. Some adults feel uncomfortable talking about the person who died, or death in general. This might make children feel like they can't talk about it either, and they might worry about showing their emotions. If you feel able to, talk to the child about the person who died, and encourage them to share their feelings if they want to. Try not to pressurise them to talk if they don't feel able to - children will grieve at different speeds.
- Some children feel lonely when an adult close to them dies. Going to a support group with other children can help them to share their feelings with others who have had similar experiences. See pages 45 to 47 for a list of organisations which have support groups.
- Children may find it easier to express their feelings through music, play or art. You could try doing some creative activities with them.

“The girls still love going to the hospice. They go back most weeks for music therapy and it helps so much. They wrote a song in memory of Granny Linda and played their newly learnt instruments and sang it at a recording studio and it was put onto a CD.”

Rachel, whose mother-in-law was cared for in a Marie Curie Hospice

Supporting a teenager who's grieving

Here are some things you could try to help teenagers who are grieving:

- Some teenagers may find it hard to talk to adults about the person who died, but it can be helpful for them to share their feelings. You could try finding other ways for them to express their emotions. For example, some organisations have online forums or support groups where teenagers can speak to others who have shared similar experiences. There is a list of these organisations on pages 45 to 47.
- School can be an important source of support for teenagers and can help to give them a break from the situation at home. It may be helpful for them to have a specific person who they can speak to at school. There is more information on getting support at school on pages 36 to 37.

- Some teenagers find that doing activities, like sport or music, may help them cope with grief. Having this social support can help to build their self-esteem if they're feeling low.
- Having positive memories of the person who died can help comfort teenagers. Sharing stories about the person, or looking at a memory box, can help them feel close and connected to the person. There is more information on sharing memories on pages 34 to 35.

Children and young people with learning disabilities

Children and young people with learning disabilities may find it harder to understand abstract ideas like death. When you are talking to them about the person who died, it can be helpful to repeat information and check they've understood what you've said. Try to encourage them to ask questions and express how they are feeling.

Some children who are non-verbal may find it helpful if you use reassuring behaviour like holding their hand, for example, to let them know they are supported. Communicate in the ways you would normally do, and in the ways you know make them feel comfortable.

Children and young people with learning disabilities may be quite dependent on adults close to them. This means that when someone dies, their lives may become disrupted. For instance, there may be changes to who looks after them, the home routine, or where they are cared for. If you can, try to keep a normal home routine as much as possible.

They might find it helpful to have a regular routine or activity in which they can celebrate the person. This could include looking at photos or a memory box of the person. Having this protected time where they can express their feelings might help them to feel reassured and secure.

They may feel guilty that the person died. Try to reassure them that the death is not their fault, and let them know you are there for them.

You might not want to talk to them about the person who died, because you feel like you want to protect them. But speaking openly can help them to make sense of the death, and it might make it easier for them to express their feelings. Some children may not show how they are feeling through words, but you might notice changes in their behaviour instead.

You may find it helpful to speak to a health and social care professional. They may be able to help you talk to the child and give them support.



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Questions children may ask

If you tell a child or young person that someone close to them has died, they may have lots of questions. You might be worried that you won't be able to answer them.

If you are unsure about how to answer any of their questions, you could ask the person's doctor, nurse, a counsellor or social worker for support.

Remember that it's OK if you don't know how to answer their questions. There are some examples below of questions children or young people may ask and the answers you could give.

These are just suggestions. Remember that every child is individual, and you may need to adapt answers depending on the child, the situation, and your beliefs.

How you answer questions will depend on how old the child is, their stage of development and whether they've had any experience of death before. You can find more information on what children might understand at different ages on pages 12 to 14.

Questions about death

What is death?

Death happens when someone's body stops working. Their body stops working, and they no longer breathe, move, eat or drink. They can't feel anything when they're dead, so it doesn't hurt and they're not in pain. They can't come back to life once they're dead.

Why do people die?

Someone's body might have been damaged by a bad accident or they might have had a very serious illness or disease that doctors couldn't make better.

When do people die?

Many people die because they're very old and their body is worn out. But not everyone who dies is very old.

Is death forever?

Yes. When someone dies nothing can bring them back to life.

When will I/you die?

I don't know. Probably not for a long time yet.

Questions about what happens after death

How you answer these types of questions will depend on your spiritual beliefs. It's OK not to know all the answers, but try to be as honest as you can and face any difficult issues that the child wants to raise.

What happens after death?

No one knows for certain what happens after someone dies. Different people have different ideas and beliefs although many share some of the same ones.

Do people have a soul? What is a soul?

As well as a physical body, some people believe that we have a soul or spirit, which is the special bit that makes us who we are. Some people believe the soul is always there, even when our body is dead.

What is heaven/jannah/paradise?

Some people believe that a person's soul or spirit goes to heaven or somewhere similar. They believe that in heaven, people are happy and free from pain. Other people believe that when you're dead there's nothing more.

If the person who died is in heaven/jannah/paradise, why are they buried/cremated?

Their body, which is the physical part that doesn't work anymore, is buried/cremated. Some people believe that their soul is in heaven.

Can the person who died see me from heaven/jannah/paradise?

Some people believe the person who died can see them and is looking after them.



Can I telephone heaven/jannah/paradise? Why can't I put up an extra-long ladder to heaven?

Heaven is not like places here on earth – you cannot phone it or go there.

Why can't they come back from heaven/Jannah/paradise?

Going to heaven is not like going to the seaside or someone else's house. Once you're there, you can't come back.

Why did God/Allah/Jehovah let the person die?

This is a question that many grown-ups can't answer either. People who believe in God believe that everything happens for a reason. This means there's a bigger plan to everything that happens that only God knows about. This can be difficult for people to understand, especially when it's so painful. Other people find it comforting.

“Since Erin died, it's difficult - at first, Amelia didn't really question anything, but since she started preschool, she does question why other children have a mummy and she doesn't.”

Chris, whose wife had a terminal illness

Questions about funerals

If the child is going to the funeral, talk to them about it beforehand, especially if they've never been to one before. This will give them an idea of what to expect. Be aware of how you explain cremation to children as they can find the idea of fire quite frightening.

For more suggestions, see Child Bereavement UK's information about explaining funerals, burials and cremation to children, which can be found on its website (see page 45).

What is a funeral?

Funerals are special ceremonies which give the family and friends of the person who died a chance to come together to remember them, to say goodbye and to think about their life. A funeral may be at a religious building such as a chapel, church, temple, synagogue or mosque. Sometimes they're at a place called a crematorium. Although they think about someone's life, funerals can be very sad.

“Before the funeral, Clodagh was asking me, where is granddad, what happens at a funeral? She didn't know what it was. I said it's OK if you get upset, you can cry, everyone is there for you. There were questions which you think, of course she doesn't know this! Why would she?”

Gemma, who helped her 10-year-old cousin when her grandfather died

What happens at a funeral?

The body of the person who died is usually put in a special box called a coffin. Music is often played and people usually speak about the person who died. The body of the person who died may be buried in the ground. Sometimes instead of being buried people are cremated. This is when the body is turned into soft ashes.

What do people wear to funerals?

People sometimes wear black or dark clothes to go to a funeral. However, some people don't like to do this. And sometimes the person who died may have said what they wanted people to wear. In different cultures, different colours can be worn.

Why do people dress up?

Sometimes people dress up because it's an important event.

How long does the funeral last?

There's no set time. It depends on how many hymns or songs there are and how many people speak.

Will people cry at the funeral?

Many people cry at funerals because they feel sad, and this is normal. However, there can also be happier moments when people remember the person who died and things they did together.

Can I go to the funeral?

You can go to the funeral, but you don't have to. Funerals can be a good way to say goodbye to the person. Would you like me to tell you about what will happen before you decide?

What happens after the funeral?

People sometimes like to put flowers on the coffin or donate money to a charity as a way of remembering the person who died. After this, people might go to someone's house for a gathering, but this doesn't always happen.

What is cremation?

Not everyone is cremated. If someone is cremated, usually at the end of the funeral, some curtains will be drawn around the coffin and we will not see it again. After everyone has gone the coffin, with the body, is put into a special, very hot oven to be turned into ash. We do not watch this bit. The ashes are then usually put into a special pot called an urn. This happens at a place called a crematorium. When you die, you don't need your body anymore, so this is why it is cremated. Some people scatter the ashes somewhere very special to the person who has died. Or they can be buried in the ground.

Will it hurt?

The person who died won't know that they're in a coffin or that they have been buried and if they're cremated it won't hurt. That's because after death their body cannot feel, hear or see.

Questions about the person who died

Not knowing what happened can make death more upsetting and frightening. There are no set answers to these questions. However, try to give as much detail as you think the child can cope with according to their age and level of understanding. Never underestimate their capacity to understand. Be guided by them and make it easy for them to ask whatever they need to.

Children may ask things like:

- What exactly happened when my mum died?
- Did you see her die?
- Was she in pain? Did it hurt?
- What did the doctor say?

Questions about how they'll be affected

The child may be frightened that they're going to die too. Knowing why someone died may help to take away some of that fear. They may also think that if only they hadn't been naughty or made so much noise, had helped more or loved the person more, they wouldn't have died.

It's important for them to know that there's nothing they could have done to stop the person dying. It can help to concentrate on talking about good memories and happy experiences.

Will I die?

Yes, you will die one day. We all die, usually when we are old. You won't die just because someone you know has died.

Can I catch cancer?/ Will I have a heart attack?/ Could I die of the thing the person died of?

You can't catch cancer or a heart attack.

(If it's relevant, like if the person had a genetic disease, you may also want to say something like this: Some diseases are genetic, meaning that a family member might be more likely to get it, but this is not usually the case).

Was it my fault?

It's not your fault that they died. Being naughty doesn't make someone die. And being kind and loving someone can't stop them from dying either – nor do wishes and thoughts. Everyone says and does things that later they wish they hadn't.

Questions about who will take care of them

Again, there are no set answers. When a parent or other close family member dies there often are major changes. It's best to be honest about these. The child may not like what they hear but dealing with reality is better than dealing with a fantasy.

Most children prefer to have something concrete to deal with rather than to guess and worry about what might happen. It may be that the news is better than they expect.

If the child is afraid to go to school, contact their teacher. They can look at what might help, for example letting the child call you during the day.

Will we have to move/change school/have enough money?

The child may worry about how the family will manage financially or whether they'll need to move house or school. Try to reassure them that even if things do change, they'll always be loved and supported.

Questions about the future

It's important that the child doesn't feel that they're betraying the person who has died by getting on with their life. It can help to find a special way to mark anniversaries, perhaps once a month at first and then every year. The child might like to make a card or pick a flower to take to the place where the person has been laid to rest.

Will my sad feelings go away?

Sad feelings don't last forever. If something reminds you of the person who died, you may feel sad again for a while.

Will I ever feel happy again?

People do feel happy again, although they never forget the person who died. It's OK if you laugh and have fun.

Will I forget my mum/dad/person who died?

You will never forget the person who has died. As time goes by you're likely to start to feel less upset than you do now and to find a way of giving the person who died a new place in your life and your memories.

Other questions children may ask

Children might also ask other questions, as well as the ones listed above. You might like to think about these and other questions just in case a child brings them up.

- Will we still go on holiday?
- Will I still get pocket money?
- Who will help me with my homework?
- Can I go to the cemetery?
- Can I make a special card to take to the cemetery?
- Will we be together when I die?

Here is some space to note down any other questions they may have. If they would feel more comfortable writing their questions rather than asking them out loud, you can also use this space for that. If you're not sure of any answers, you could make a note of the questions here and come back to them at a later date.

Helping children say goodbye

For adults, rituals – anything from a traditional funeral to scattering ashes in a special place – are an important part of saying goodbye to a loved one. Bereaved children may also benefit from the chance to remember loved ones in this way. It can help them express their grief and share it with others.

The funeral

It may seem difficult to have a child around when you have to cope with your own feelings of loss. But it can help children to express their sadness if they're with family and friends.

Do what feels right for you and them. Here are some things which may help:

- Prepare them. You can tell a child what's going to happen at the funeral so they have some idea of what to expect. This will include explaining about the dead person and their body. Try to find your own words for this, words which fit in with your beliefs.
- Give them a choice. You might want to protect the child by keeping them away from the funeral. But later in life children often express disappointment that they weren't even given the choice to attend. You might like to let the child decide if they would like to go as this gives them a voice and a sense of control. You could let them know that whatever they decide is OK.
- Allow them to contribute to the ceremony. They could help choose music and flowers, or put a drawing on top of the coffin.

- Have an alternative ceremony. If the child doesn't want to go, is there something you could do together at home to celebrate the person's memory? This could be planting a tree, letting off a balloon, or placing a garden ornament in their memory.
- Provide support. Have someone such as a favourite aunt or uncle sit with them who can leave the service with them if it gets too much. This takes the pressure off you if you're also organising the funeral.
- Help them understand. You may want to help the child separate the person they knew from the body being buried or cremated. Depending on the child's age you could tell them that the body of whoever has died doesn't work anymore. It can no longer move, eat, speak or think. It can't be mended and won't do the things it used to do – but it won't feel hurt, cold or pain any more, either.

For further advice on telling children about funerals, Child Bereavement UK and Winston's Wish have useful information (see pages 45 to 47).

“At my nan’s funeral, they had pictures of my nan which the children could colour in and write messages. They were all involved and me and my cousins, even the older ones, got to write something for my nan.”

Niamh, 14, whose nan had a terminal illness

Should they see the body?

For some families, viewing the body of a loved one is an important part of coming to terms with their death. Children too can find this helps them to say goodbye or be reassured that the person is no longer suffering. Allow them to choose if they want to do this, and prepare them for what to expect. If the child doesn't want to view the body, respect their wishes and help them find their own ways of saying goodbye.

Making and sharing memories

There are many ways of helping children and young people celebrate the life of their loved one. These suggestions may help:

- Let them keep something that belonged to the person who died, such as an item of clothing.
- Make a memory box where the child can keep all the special items that remind them of the person.
- Get each member of the family, including the child, to choose a button or gem stone that represent a happy memory of the person. Make the buttons or gemstones into a collage.
- Share happy stories about the person who has died and talk about them.
- Look through old photographs or videos.
- Make a scrapbook together about the person who has died.

- Start a journal of memories that can be added to by anyone at any time. This may help children who have lost someone at a young age to remember the person who has died as they grow up.
- Involve the child in choosing pictures for a social media memorial page.

“Clodagh asked me how I would remember grandad. I was quite taken aback! So I asked her how she would remember him. He had a big bushy beard and she said she would remember it tickling her when she kissed him. It was really nice, we shared a moment.”

Gemma, who helped her 10-year-old cousin when her grandfather died.

Next steps

Feelings of grief may affect a child differently over time and children may grieve in cycles rather than all at once. This means that, although a child's grief may seem shorter than an adult's, it may in fact last longer. People who are bereaved as children may revisit their grief at significant milestones such as starting a new school, going to university, starting a job, getting married or having children of their own.

They need to know that it's OK to move on with life when they're ready and that they shouldn't feel guilty about it. Let them know that everyone comes to terms with death in their own way, at their own pace. Some days will be tougher than others but they'll eventually be OK.

“It’s not so bad now as we’re all getting on with things, but we might go somewhere and one of the kids will say ‘Mum enjoyed that’. We have the odd moments like that, where I forget that she’s gone. I’ve tried to go back to those places that meant a lot to us and where we had fun times, so we don’t forget.”

Chris, whose wife had a terminal illness

Returning to school

Some children may want to return to school immediately after a loved one has died, others may need some time off. Talk to the child and see what they feel they can manage.

It’s also important to speak to the school about how much time the child can take off. For instance, they might be able to cope with school if they go for just a few hours a day for a while.

They may also refuse to go at all because they worry you won’t be there when they get back. However, because stability is important, too much time off could have the opposite effect. Here are some ideas that might make it easier:

- Tell the school that you’ve had a bereavement. They may offer support. The child might also find it helpful to talk to a teacher about how they’re feeling.
- You might find it helpful to share this booklet with the child’s teacher.

- Tell the school what’s happened and ask them to let you know how the child is coping. It may be useful for you to find out if there is someone at school who the child can speak to about how they’re feeling, like the school nurse or a wellbeing officer. If possible, you could speak to them too, and hear about how the child is getting on.
- Ask the child what they’d like you to tell their school so they feel involved and have a say. This is especially important with older children.
- Make sure they know what you’ve said and to whom, and check that their teacher has received your message.
- If the child is finding it hard to go to school, create a handkerchief with your fingerprints or handprints on it, and maybe even spray it with scent. This can help them feel that you are close to them and safe.

“School for Thomas was his main escape, it was the routine he needed. Things were so stressful that he needed to go and be a child, rather than being someone who goes to funeral homes. His friends are amazing and I knew he would be OK at school. And if he needed time out, he could have it.”

Carole, whose mum was cared for in Marie Curie’s Bradford Hospice

Looking after yourself

If you're supporting a child or young person when someone dies, you might feel like their needs take priority over yours. But it's important to look after yourself, and to take time to address your grief, as well as theirs. Here are some things you could try:

- Try to eat healthily, even if you don't feel like it.
- Emotional stress such as grief can make you feel tired. If you're having trouble sleeping you can visit your GP, but you can also try things such as exercising during the day, avoiding caffeine and alcohol, and going to bed at the same time each night.
- Remember that it's OK to cry if you want to. Crying can be the body's way to reduce stress and soothe itself. It is a normal reaction to someone's death.
- Try reaching out to friends and family. Although it might seem like an effort to reach out to people, you might feel better for having some company. They might also be able to help you care for the child, by looking after them so you can have a break, or taking them to clubs or school.
- Some people benefit from talking to a professional counsellor or psychotherapist. If you think you might need professional grief counselling, speak to your GP. They may be able to refer you for counselling. They may also be able to give you information about family counselling services and support groups.

Remember that you don't have to go through bereavement alone. There are lots of ways to get support, whether you prefer to talk to someone in person or join an online community. If you would like to speak to someone about your feelings, you can contact the Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

We have more information on looking after yourself when you're grieving in our booklet, **When someone dies**.

“I felt guilty thinking, I can't have time off work, because Thomas still has to go to school. Me and my sister had a week off, then we went back to work. That was a mistake because it got to the point that I couldn't be strong anymore. You try to put a brave face on, but that face keeps on slipping.”

Carole, whose mum was cared for in Marie Curie's Bradford Hospice

Books to support children with grief

Here are some books about death and coping with feelings of grief. You might find it helpful to read these with children or young people, or give to them to read themselves. These have been recommended by healthcare professionals, including bereavement counsellors.

Badger's parting gifts by Susan Varley, 1984 (Andersen Press)

This book tells the story of Badger's peaceful death and his friends remembering what Badger taught them while he was alive.

Michael Rosen's sad book by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake, 2004 (Walker Books)

This tells the story of Michael's grief when his son Eddie dies from meningitis, aged 19. It acknowledges that sadness is not always avoidable or reasonable and explains complicated feelings in simple terms. Suitable for ages five and above.

Muddles, puddles and sunshine by Diana Crossley and Kate Sheppard, 2001 (Hawthorn Press, UK)

An illustrated activity book offering practical support for bereaved younger children. It includes activities and exercises to help children understand the different aspects of grief.



iStock

The coat I wear by Mel Maxwell and Michelle Stewart, 2014 (I Am Somewhat Ltd)

A story which follows the grief of a child after their sibling dies. They describe their grief like wearing a heavy, uncomfortable coat, which over time becomes easier and easier to wear.

The invisible string by Patrice Karst and Geoff Stevenson, 2000 (DeVorss and Co)

The Invisible String looks at how to cope with loneliness and separation from someone you love. Suitable for ages three and above.

**The memory tree by Britta Teckentrup, 2013
(Hachette Children's Group)**

A book which teaches children to celebrate the memories of someone who's died. When Fox lies down in the woods and falls asleep forever, his friends gather round to tell stories about his life.

**Water bugs and dragonflies: explaining death to young children by Doris Stickney, 1982
(The Pilgrim Press)**

A storybook which helps to answer some of the questions children might have about death, by telling the story of a water bug who turns into a dragonfly.

When dinosaurs die: a guide to understanding death by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown, 1996 (Little, Brown books for young readers)

A book which helps answer the questions children might have about death using simple language.

**When someone very special dies: children can learn to cope with grief by Marge Heegaard, 1988
(Woodland Press)**

This book helps children come to terms with their grief by drawing what they're feeling.

How Marie Curie can help

Marie Curie is here for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from, and those close to them. Whatever the illness, wherever you are, we're with you to the end.

Marie Curie Support Line

0800 090 2309*

Our free Support Line is for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from and those close to them. Our team, including nurses and specialist Energy Support Officers, offers practical and emotional support on everything from symptom management and day-to-day care to financial information and bereavement support. Our Support Line is available in over 200 languages, or via webchat at mariecurie.org.uk/support. Open between 8am to 6pm from Monday to Friday, and 11am to 5pm on Saturday.

Marie Curie Companions

Companion volunteers focus on what's important to you and those close to you. It might be accompanying you to appointments, being there to listen to how you're feeling without judgment, or stepping in so family or carers can take a break. Companions provide the emotional and practical support you want - at home, in hospital or over the phone.

mariecurie.org.uk/companions

Marie Curie Telephone Bereavement Service

Get ongoing bereavement support over the phone from the same volunteer. You can access up to six sessions of 45 minutes. We can help if your bereavement was expected, happened recently or was some time ago.

mariecurie.org.uk/bereavement

* Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

Marie Curie Online Community

Our Online Community is a space for you to share thoughts, feelings and experiences. It's moderated by the Marie Curie Support Line team, who can also help answer your questions.

community.mariecurie.org.uk

Marie Curie Hospice care where it's needed

Our hospices

Our hospices help people with any illness they're likely to die from, and the people close to them, receive the support they need. From medical and physical support to psychological and emotional care, whatever your illness, at whatever stage of the journey, we help you to live the best life possible, right to the end.

mariecurie.org.uk/hospices

Hospice care at home

Our nurses, healthcare assistants and other healthcare professionals bring the clinical, practical and emotional help you need to you, in the comfort of your own home. And we offer support to the people close to you too – from reassurance and practical information to letting them take a break.

mariecurie.org.uk/nurses

Looking for more information?

If you found this booklet useful, we have free information available online at mariecurie.org.uk/support or to order at mariecurie.org.uk/publications

Useful organisations

Barnardo's

barnardos.org.uk

A charity which supports children, young people, parents and carers.

Child Bereavement UK

0800 02 888 40

childbereavementuk.org

Supports families when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement.

Childhood Bereavement Network

childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

Aims to improve the quality and range of bereavement support for children, young people, their families and other caregivers. Offers information about support services.

Childline

0800 1111

childline.org.uk

Confidential 24/7 helpline for children and young people in the UK up to age 19. Childline is free, confidential and available any time. Available by phone, by email or through 1-2-1 counsellor chat.

Children 1st

08000 28 22 33

children1st.org.uk

Scotland's national children's society, which provides advice and support for parents and families.

Cruse Bereavement Care

0808 808 1677

cruse.org.uk

A charity which helps bereaved people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland

0845 600 2227

crusescotland.org.uk

A charity which helps bereaved people in Scotland.

Grief Encounter

0808 802 0111

griefencounter.org.uk

Supports bereaved children and teenagers through its website.

Kinship Care NI

0800 022 3129

kinshipcareni.com

This Northern Ireland charity for kinship carers has a helpline, and runs a drop-in service and support programme based in Derry.

Mencap

0808 808 1111

mencap.org.uk

A charity which supports people with learning disabilities, their families, and their carers. It works across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Winston's Wish

08088 020 021

winstonswish.org

A child bereavement charity which offers specialist practical support and guidance to bereaved children, their families and professionals.

About this information

This booklet was produced by Marie Curie's Information and Support team. It has been developed with people affected by terminal illness, and health and social care professionals.

If you'd like the list of sources used to create this information, please email review@mariecurie.org.uk or call the free Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309***.

Notice

The information in this publication is provided for the benefit and personal use of people with a terminal illness, their families and carers.

This information is provided as general guidance for information purposes only. It should not be considered as medical or clinical advice, or used as a substitute for personalised or specific advice from a qualified medical practitioner. In respect of legal, financial or other matters covered by this information, you should also consider seeking specific professional advice about your personal circumstances.

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Did you find this information useful?

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Marie Curie

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We also have an Online Community where you can share thoughts, feelings and experiences at community.mariecurie.org.uk

We can't do it without you

Our free information and support services are entirely funded by your generous donations. Thanks to you, we can continue to offer people what they need, when they need it.

To donate, visit mariecurie.org.uk/donate

* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

