

## **COPING WITH LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT**

### **A guide for Parents/Carers of primary aged children.**

Grief is a normal process we all engage in in response to the news of the death of a loved one or member of our community. It is important to recognise that while the process of grieving can be painful and uncomfortable it is important to give individuals the opportunity to process their grief naturally, where possible.

How children make sense of and respond to death develops as they grow older, wiser and gain more life experience.

Some young children may not yet understand that death is final and irreversible, whilst others will understand this, as well as that it happens to everyone and will happen to them and those they love. Children may display strong reactions to the loss of someone they love or know including shock, denial or depression. It is important to remember that children are not only dealing with the experience of loss but trying to learn how to make sense and process these feelings. There is no one, right way to process grief.

#### ***What should I expect?***

For adults supporting children at this time in their lives it may be helpful to be aware of the following normal reactions to grief.

- Intrusive memories of the person who has died, including memories of situations that might invoke strong feelings
- Sights or sounds or smells which might be associated with the person who has died
- Not wanting to visit places they associate with the person who has died or to do activities they associate with them
- Feeling fearful when away from safe places and people
- Becoming overprotective and anxious about the welfare of people who are important to them
- Appearing to be more anxious or detached
- Seeming on edge, or hypervigilant
- Irritable or sudden changes in mood, in particular anger
- Difficulty concentrating (may be coupled with unwelcome thoughts about death or the person who has died)
- Tension headaches
- Tearfulness and restlessness
- An increase or decrease in appetite or sleep

#### ***Should they see a counsellor?***

The best people to support a child around dealing with their grief are the people they are close to already. While grief can be distressing, most children, with the help of their support network, will process this naturally.

Meeting with a psychologist or therapist at this vulnerable point in their life has been shown not only to be unhelpful but to be potentially damaging. It is for this reason that our service does not meet with young people or offer direct counselling in situations like these.

If in the coming months you notice that your child is not progressing with their grief, or if they appear to be deteriorating then you may wish to seek further support at that time.

### ***Coping with loss when a child has died – some suggestions for parents/carers***

The death of a child or young person is a difficult situation even for many adults to make sense of and so it can feel particularly challenging supporting a child when they have experienced the loss of a friend, sibling or other young relative. Again be led by your child and their natural reactions to these circumstances.

- Acknowledge your own feelings – it is important for children to know that it is natural to be upset and to cry – for adults and children. It is better to share feelings than to deny them.
- However it is important to understand that grieving is a normal part of life and that everyone will respond differently to loss and that is ok.
- Recognise that the death of a child may make you more aware of your own child's mortality. It will not be unusual to find yourself constantly checking that they are OK.
- It may be helpful to invite your child to ask questions about what happened to help correct them where misconceptions have occurred.
- Give as much accurate information as your child asks for but do not try to explain the unexplainable or the unknown. If you don't know the answers to their questions it is best to say so.
- Listening attentively is the best support that can be given to grieving people but it can be difficult if supporting adults are also struggling with their own emotional response to the loss.
- Remember that there are others who can help.

### ***Talking to children about death***

- Tell them the truth as far as you know it. It's OK to say "I don't know".
- Listen and let them lead the conversation.
- Talk about death and the person who has died – don't avoid the issue and avoid terms like "passed away" or "gone to sleep".
- Don't worry if your child repeats questions as they may need time to "take it all in" and may need to continue to ask questions.
- Return questions e.g. "What happens when we die?" with "What do you think happens?" Accept the child's views or bring it round to more pleasant possibilities.
- In time, help your child to remember the person who has died:
  - What do you remember?
  - What did you like about him/her?
  - What will you miss about him/her?
- Allow them to remember things they did not like too.
- Let your child be encouraged to take part in the planning for 'remembrance' of the person who has died.

### **Useful Local/National Contact Information**

- Childline (24 hrs) - 0800 1111; [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- Cruse Bereavement Care- [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)
- Cruise Helpline - 0808 808 1677
- Kingston Bereavement Service - 020 8547 1552; [www.kingstonbereavementservice.org.uk](http://www.kingstonbereavementservice.org.uk)
- Saying Good Bye Project (KBS) 020 8547 1552
- Winston's Wish – 08088 020 021; [www.winstonswish.org](http://www.winstonswish.org)
- Samaritans (24 hours) – 116 123;