

Helping children

when someone close dies



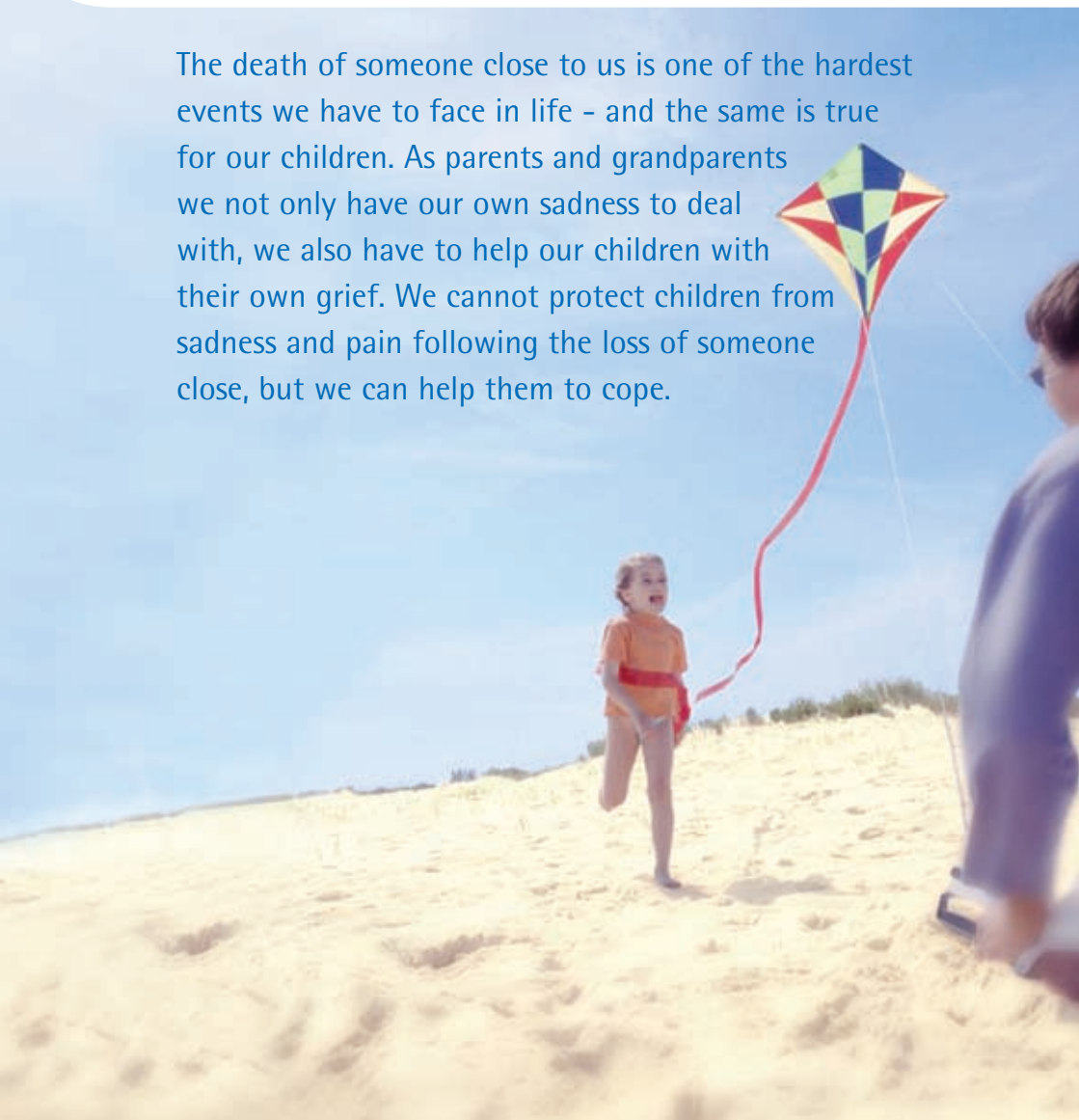
Marie Curie
Cancer Care



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when someone close dies

The death of someone close to us is one of the hardest events we have to face in life - and the same is true for our children. As parents and grandparents we not only have our own sadness to deal with, we also have to help our children with their own grief. We cannot protect children from sadness and pain following the loss of someone close, but we can help them to cope.



Being honest

Your child needs to know what has happened, in simple language. Half truths don't help and may cause your child problems because he or she may misunderstand them. Some children may feel in some way it is their fault that someone has died.

Looking after yourself

You are bereaved too, and it can be acutely painful to manage your own feelings as well as those of your child. Sometimes it's just impossible. Don't expect to get it right all of the time. You can only do your best.

Find other resources for yourself and your child, don't try to carry it all on your own. Get away from the family from time to time and give yourself a break. It will help you to cope better when you are with them.

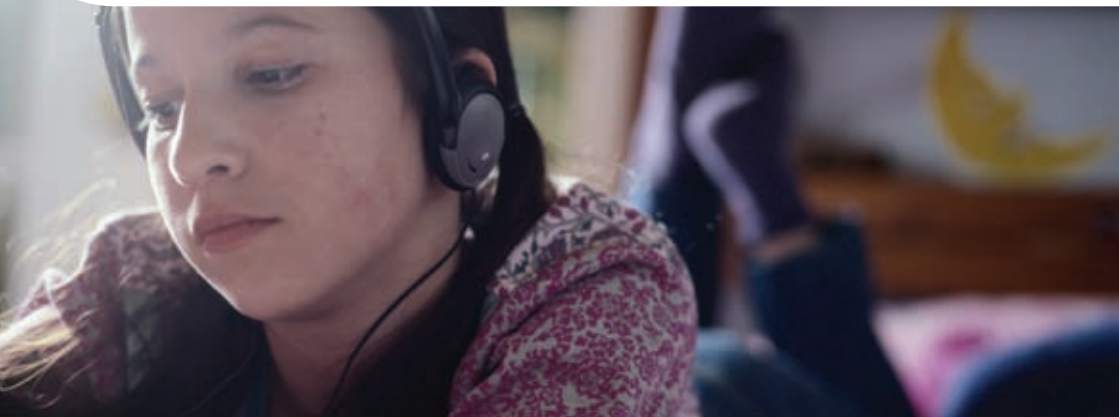
Remember your children have resources of their own too. Surviving this experience is something your children will carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Grief takes a long time

Some children seem to cope fine, and become if anything rather good and quiet. Grief can sometimes catch up with them years after a death, as if the pain was stored up and waiting for the right moment to come out. Other big changes - moving house, starting a new school may bring those painful feelings to the surface again.

Let the head teacher of the school know about what has happened and ask them to let you know how your child is coping. Ask your child what they would like you to say to their school so that they feel involved and have a choice about this. This is especially important with older children. Make sure your child knows what you have said and to who, and check the class teacher got the information.

Children often repeat the same questions about the death over some months. This can be very distressing to you as you cope with your own grief. It is part of their need for reassurance and their need to check that the facts have not changed. They will revisit the subject over the years as their understanding grows.



Watch for changed behaviour

At times children seem unaffected by the death and play happily as if nothing has happened. Watch for changed behaviour. Clinging on to you may be a plea for reassurance that you are not going to die and leave them too. Aggressive or angry behaviour may be a way of expressing fury and helplessness in the face of loss.

Most children will feel insecure. Children can change or regress and act in an immature or babyish way. They may find it hard to concentrate once at school and may fall behind with their work. Others may have problems going to sleep and become afraid of the dark. Young children may wet or soil again, or want a long forgotten bottle or dummy. Children of any age may wet the bed. They may become more prone to illness. The way they behave can vary a lot from day to day.

Young children have problems knowing what death means. They may seem to have taken in what has happened one day and ask after the dead person the next. Children are likely to be most upset in the first few weeks after someone's death, but many children will feel their loss on particular occasions throughout their childhoods and even into their adult lives.

Some children may refuse to go to school, fearing you will not be there when they get back.

How to help your child

Honest, open talking with your child is very important. Remember that you cannot stop the pain of losing someone. It is right to be sad when someone dies and trying to protect children from unhappiness may make problems for them in later life.

Most adults feel awkward talking about death, especially to children. They are afraid they might frighten their child or say the wrong thing. You need to talk about death and provide honest and truthful answers to your child's questions. Often the meaning of your child's question is unclear. It may be wise to ask "why do you ask me that?" before trying to answer. It is best to avoid answers like "Daddy has gone to sleep" as your child may fear going to sleep or "Grandma has gone away" as your child may believe she will come back.

Children are better able than we think to take on board an honest attempt to explain death.

They may ask the same question again and again. This is normal because they have not developed a concept of death as final. It is your child's way of coming to understand what has happened. Make sure your child does not feel to blame for the death. Reassure your child that nothing they said or did has made the person die.



Funeral rituals

You may want to protect your child from something that can be very daunting to adults. But they have lost someone too and need the chance to express their loss and have it recognised by others. Later in life bereaved children often express disappointment that they were not allowed to attend the funeral. Ask them how they feel about it. They may not want to go and that wish should be respected. But if they do wish to go, then you will be there to support them.

Explain the whole of the service so that they have some idea of what to expect. This may mean explaining simple things about the dead person and their body. Try to find your own words for this. Overleaf are some suggestions for explaining what has happened.

- You may find it helpful when talking to your child to keep separate the person they knew and their memories and feelings about them from the body that is to be buried or cremated at the funeral.
- You might want to tell them that the body of whoever has died doesn't work anymore. The body can no longer move, eat, speak, think or feel pain. It cannot be mended and will not do the things it used to do, but will not feel hurt, cold or pain anymore (this is important for understanding burial and cremation). This can feel very difficult for you in your grief, but there are books that can help small children understand these aspects of death. The child and young people's bereavement worker and social workers at your Marie Curie Hospice have a collection of books that you may wish to look at before you choose to buy one.

Children can take part in funerals.
They can leave their own flowers, letter
or drawing for the person who has died.



Memories

Afterwards, let your child or children choose a memento belonging to the person who has died. Show them photos of the person, tell them stories about him or her. Looking through old photographs or perhaps making a scrap book can help your child talk about their thoughts and feelings. Often your child can gain great pleasure from being allowed to keep an object which reminds them of the person who has died or they may like to make up a memory box to keep together all items which have special meanings or hold memories.

Don't tell your child not to worry or be sad. They cannot control their feelings, just as you cannot control your own. Don't try to hide your pain. It is all right to cry in front of your child. You will need to talk to people yourself through the difficult times. Do let your child know that you understand how they are feeling and that you are there for them whenever they want to talk.

Your child needs plenty of reassurance. Let them know you love them and will be there for them. Give them lots of cuddles. Let your child know that feelings are important. Take time to listen to them. If you have not got time when they ask a question, tell them you will make time later and do so. Teenagers may want to spend more time on their own – let them.

There is no right or wrong way of grieving. Each child is unique and special. Take things one day at a time and remember that your family's sadness and pain will heal in time.

Local contacts

If you need advice or support in helping your child adjust to loss you can contact the children and young people's counsellor or one of the social workers in your Marie Curie Hospice.

Books that might help

Grief in children: a handbook for adults (1991)

Atle Dyregrov
Jessica Kingsley
Publishers, £12.95
ISBN 185302113X

Never too young to know: death in children's lives (1999)

Phyllis Silverman
Oxford University
Press Inc, USA, £13.99
ISBN 0195109554

Healing children's grief: surviving a parent's death from cancer (2000)

Grace H Christ
Oxford University Inc. USA,
£19.99 ISBN 0195105915

Children and grief (2002)

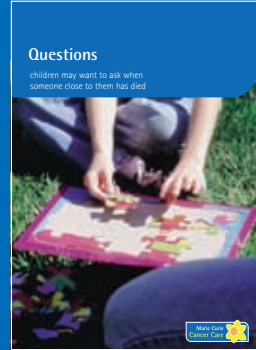
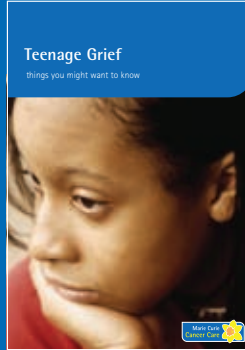
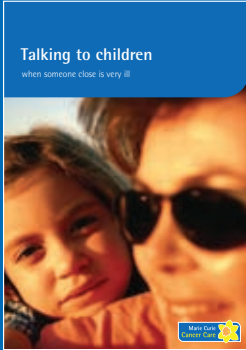
William Worden
Guilford Publications, £17.95
ISBN 1572307463

All prices correct at time of printing

Table of stages of children's grief

Age	Concept of death	Reaction
0-2 years	No concept of death, separation, despair	<p>4-7 months – protests at detachment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Stranger anxiety ● Behaviour regression ● Feeding and sleeping difficulties
2-5 years	<p>Death seen as reversible</p> <p>May feel they have caused death</p> <p>Magical thinking – makes up fantasies to fill gaps in knowledge</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fears: abandonment, separation, intrusive procedures, mutilation ● Loud protest ● Despair ● Indignant at any change in patterns of living ● Sleep problems ● Regressive behaviour
5-11 years	<p>More permanence</p> <p>Exposure to death</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression ● Anger – behaviour, learning, school problems ● Perfect child ● Regression ● Brave – control
Adolescence	<p>Death permanent</p> <p>Denial – it can't happen</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Withdrawal, sadness, depression, loneliness ● Anger, rejection ● Joking, sarcasm ● Regression, dependence

Other booklets in this set:



For information about cancer and other conditions,
plus links to websites offering information and support,
visit: www.mariecurie.org.uk/patientsandcarers



Your local Marie Curie Hospice actively promotes quality of life for people with cancer and other illnesses and provides support for their families, completely free.

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