

The Bereavement Needs of Grieving Children

Following the Harvard Child Bereavement study, Worden summarised the main needs of grieving children¹.

Adequate Information

Children need information that is clear and recognises their developmental stage (e.g. whether or not they understand the finality of death). Using euphemisms is not helpful (for example 'Gran has gone to sleep', 'Grandad has gone to a better place' This information is likely to need revisited as the child's understanding grows and new questions emerge. When adequate information is not given children tend to make up a story to fill the gaps.

It is helpful, where possible, to inform and prepare a child for an impending death. Some ideas are given [here](#).

Fears and Anxieties Addresses

Children and young people need to be reassured that they are safe and that they will be cared for. They may have fears about their own safety or that of their surviving family. Conversations around their fears will offer opportunities to reassure them.

Reassurance they are not to blame

Children need to know that they did not cause the death through their thoughts or actions.

Careful Listening

Children and young people need to feel they can voice their fears and ask questions. They may not always want to ask their parent as they may think they will cause them distress. It is important, therefore, that children and young people have a key adult who can be there to listen and answer what they can.

Validation of Individuals' Feelings

¹ Worden, W. (1996) 'Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies' The Guilford Press

Feelings must be acknowledged and respected as valid. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Children and young people are sometimes given the message by those around them that they are feeling too little, too much or for too long. Instead they need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings in their own way. Even within one family, children will have their own coping strategies and their own relationship with the deceased so their grief will present in different ways.

Help with Overwhelming Feelings

Children and young people need help in dealing with emotions that are too intense to be expressed verbally. Drawing, sculpting, writing, exercise, music and other outlets may be helpful.

Involvement and Inclusion

Children need involved before and after the death of someone close to them. Mc Millan Sometimes younger children are excluded from preparations but it is important that everyone has the opportunity to have involvement. No one, however, should be forced to take part in a way they do not want. Rituals or creating new traditions can be a helpful way to include everyone, for example a Pizza night on Dad's anniversary as he loved pizza.

Continued Routine Activities

Children benefit from maintaining age appropriate interests and activities. Many wish to return to school fairly quickly after a significant loss and this gives some familiarity and routine to their world.

Modelled Grief Behaviours

Children and young people learn how to cope with grief by observing adults. Adults can help by showing that it is alright to remember the person and encourage them to think about the person and to talk about their memories and what they miss or don't miss about the person.

Opportunities to Remember

Children need to be able to remember their parent, not only in the immediate aftermath of a death but over time as they reach new stages in their own life. These opportunities

to remember can be varied such as conversations, acts of commemoration or physical collections e.g. a memory box.