



Bereavement

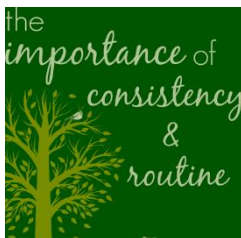
When a child has suffered a bereavement, we can often struggle with knowing what to say and how to help. It is important to remember that to ***say something and listen is always always better than saying nothing*** when a child is hurting and reaching out – through behaviour or words. Remembering every behaviour is a communication and connection is, in itself a very important part of supporting a child who is hurting.

Age and stage of child is important and strategies will need to be adapted not only to meet developmental stage but to meet personality and circumstances.



Language – keep it simple.

- ***Language should be clear, simple and leave no doubt at all about what we are saying*** – bold, brave and confident communications show that, as adults we are unafraid and can cope with any conversations that a child wants to have. It is common to try to soften conversations with the use of euphemisms such as a person is sleeping, passed or lost when what we mean is that a person has died.
- Clear language leaves no ambiguity and creates an environment of trust and encourages a child to speak openly because they sense that the adult is confident and able to help them survive the unbearable with honesty.
- An explanation of the concept of dying or death may be necessary and appropriate. Simple phrases like when a person has died they wont ever wake up again, their body doesn't work anymore, their heart has stopped beating will provide clarity and avoid ambiguity. As adults we can assume a great deal and by being clear a child will have an understanding \without having to ask questions,



Routines – make it predictable.

At a time of chaos and confusion it is important that we provide a sense of calm, consistency and predictability. This will reduce cognitive overload, stress and sense of anxiety by providing routines and predictability so that a child is reassured by the pattern of each day or even a part of the day.

- Are there elements of the day that can continue as usual?
- Is it possible to keep parts of the day the same as before?
- Are there points in the day that will be very obviously different to how they were before? Maybe collection or drop off to school or a weekly club. In this situation we

might choose to be very straightforward with our language – ‘now that Daddy has died, Mummy will be picking you up’ or we might simply be emotionally aware and physically supportive at this specific time, realising that the loss will be more keenly felt at this particular moment and being physically and emotionally available. Another option might be to decide that a routine needs to be changed completely to avoid that time and situation entirely and create a new routine that distracts from the loss.

- Routines like clubs and hobbies may be comforting as normality and should be encouraged if it is what the child wants and feels comfortable with. An awareness and close observation with the opportunity to opt out will mean that a child is comfortable and is able to communicate feelings through word or behaviour depending on what feels right at the time.
- Boundaries and rules provide predictability and a sense of safety and are very important. Very often rules will be flexible for children who are experiencing grief and this is appropriate but they will feel unsafe and become dysregulated if they do not know what is expected of them and what they can expect from the adults around them. Research is very clear that children need clearly demarcated boundaries to feel psychologically as well as physically safe and secure and this is so important when everything else seems so uncertain and unpredictable in the world.



Validate all feelings

Children might feel a range of feelings and that is ok. They need to hear that there is no right or wrong way to grieve and every emotion is valid.

Conversations around emotions and exploring feelings can be challenging for children, especially at times of distress and planned conversations and activities may be needed to open dialogue.

- Use emojis or blob trees – children are familiar with emojis and both activities provide a conversation vehicle that depersonalises and enables a child to communicate emotions without needing emotional literacy or confidence
- For a younger child - use look inside binoculars. Working together and creating a pair of binoculars, using toilet roll holders, sequins, stars, paint etc adds a closeness to a relationship and a shared experience that builds trust and friendship. Once created use binoculars to be curious and ‘look inside’ at emotions that are there. Afterwards follow the lead of the child and draw the emotions, write them down or talk about them. Encourage the child to use the binoculars regularly to identify different emotions and be able to name them.
- For an older child – use guided journaling. Provide a journal and decide what level of guidance is appropriate. Phrases such as I am, I feel, I hope and I wish can be

valuable starters for journal entries. Journals can be kept personal or shared and can be written / drawn or recorded electronically.

It's Okay to Be Angry



Anger is ok.

Children who have been bereaved will have inevitable feelings of anger. They might feel guilty about feeling angry and try to hide it and keep it inside. This can lead to a pressure cooker of emotions where frustration and upset becomes explosive and ultimately children experience behaviour discharges. It

is important to support a child to talk about their feelings of anger and understand that the feelings are normal and valid if we are to prevent this from happening and impacting on mental health and wellbeing.

- Explore anger at times of calm – what does it feel like? Consider drawing a body map and drawing what each part of the body feels like when the child is getting angry, is angry, has stopped feeling angry.
- Explore safe ways of channelling anger. Write anger rules – it is ok to be angry but not to harm others, ourselves, property with either physical anger or verbal anger.
- If we don't see anger it is important to encourage the child to understand that anger is ok and that you are a safe person to share it with. They might feel guilty at being angry or feel that they need to be brave so telling them being angry is valid and acceptable will be very important. This might be done through story or angry music and it might be necessary to reassure the child that you wouldn't be sharing angry feelings with other members of the family.

WHAT'S YOUR PLAN?



Make a plan.

At times of distress the frontal cortex part of our brain disengages and we are controlled by the emotional limbic part of the brain. We are unable to clearly think and make rational decisions. Therefore, it can be really useful, at a time of calm and happiness, to think about what people can do to help and support at times of distress and sadness and also what they shouldn't do. This should also include what a child can do to help themselves feel better when they recognise that they are beginning to feel upset.

- This plan can include breathing exercises or relaxation techniques or seeking out a particular adult to co-regulate with.
- Record the plan in an age appropriate and accessible way so that there is a concrete and clear plan- visual, written on a card or in a planner, or on a phone if appropriate.

- Communicate the plan to all adults concerned so that the child can be supported and understood.
- Consider encouraging the child to share their plan with a friend or small group of friends so that they can be supported at times of distress – maybe by pointing to the plan visual or quietly suggesting the idea that the plan might be a good idea.
- Include what should not be said or done – some children might like to joke and laugh, others may definitely not.
- Return often to the plan to consider if a child needs it to be changed – what works when the plan is made may not work a week later.



Generate joy.

Children who have been bereaved often think it is not ok to be happy. They might have moments of happiness and excitement and hope for the future but then feel guilty about these feelings and try to suppress or hide them.

- It is important they are reassured that all feelings are ok and even that they consider what their loved one would want for them. Would they want them to feel happy? Feel joy? Feel hopeful? The answer will be yes and this will give them permission to accept that feeling.
- Ask the child what used to bring them joy and how they can do more of those things. Finding joy in life will be important and a way of coming away from difficult and chaotic thoughts and feelings.
- It will be important to think carefully about the way that activities might need to be changed if they are too upsetting or trigger too much pain. Activities could be done in a different way, at a different time or at a different place.
- Often being brave enough to speak openly with a child about the idea that their loved one would love to see them happy gives them the permission to find some joy in their life.



Crying is ok

Children who have been bereaved will also feel sad and it is important that they also know that this is also ok and that crying is an acceptable and often cathartic way of expressing sadness. If children are not supported to express sadness then the impact on their mental wellbeing can be long-term.

- Tell a child that crying is ok. Consider creating a calm and welcoming space for a child to access when they feel sad and want to cry.

- Children may not feel able to cry at home because they believe they need to brave or crying is just not what happens in their home so communicating very clearly that crying is acceptable and valid at school will be very important.
- Crying sometimes takes practice and by sharing sad stories or sad music in the safe place, a child may feel safer and more able to cry. Crying about an unrelated situation may be easier at first than crying about sadness caused by the bereavement.
- Crying is a way of letting go of big feelings and provides a release. Some children do not feel able to cry and activities such as singing, art and drama can be alternative ways of letting go of big feelings.



Saying what has been left unsaid.

Sometimes bereaved children will have things that they wish they could have said to a loved one. It is important to explore these things and give children the opportunity to explore and share the things they wished they could have said.

- Write a letter.
- Draw a picture.
- Record a message.
- Provide the opportunity to say the things they wish they had said or if the child prefers to share an update about what has happened since their loved one had died.
- It might evolve so that the child thinks of a possible response from their loved one and this can bring comfort and generate joy and also help to keep memories and connections alive.
- There can sometimes be feelings of guilt or unanswered questions and by communicating those and having a trusted adult to facilitate conversation around what a loved one's response might be can often lead to resolution and relief. It may be that this is not something that a child can explore at home – they may feel it will upset others – and so having opportunity at school will be hugely important.



Keep and make memories.

Making a memory box or jar is a way of holding a loved one in mind and can be an activity that generates joy and also supports transitions into the future without that person being a physical part of the child's life.

- A memory box or jar can hold pictures, photographs and anything that the child wants to put in it that reminds them of the times that they shared with their loved one.
- The memory box or jar can also be somewhere that the child can communicate with their loved one about new memories. Adding new pictures, letters and photographs to share new experiences in the present and as often as they want to.
- The memory box or jar can act as an open communication where the child can talk about how their loved one might have reacted to a situation or special time and can be updated whenever and however a child wants it to be.



- A sand / salt jar with a layer that represents a memory can be created and used as a transitional object. If the jar is small enough it can be carried in a pocket and can be used as a calming technique or a trigger of joy.
- Being brave and bold and communicating to a child that their loved one would want them to be creating and sharing new memories is reassuring and comforting and entirely authentic and really powerful to share.



Saying something and being there is better than saying nothing, even if you get it wrong. Caring and trying again will make a difference. Kindness will make a difference and help to heal.