**“I don’t know what to say!”  An introduction to bereavement and loss**

The very worst thing that could ever happen in that child’s life, has just happened – you can’t make it worse! Often following a death in the family, children don’t want to talk to other family members about it. They are worried about upsetting them and will try to protect them from further pain. School can provide a trusted person to ‘check in’ with; could be a teacher, LSA, Senco – whoever they feel comfortable with. With young children you might want to catch up daily initially. With older children be led by them. They may not want to continue to talk about it at all. That’s ok too. It’s really not about what you say to them; just let them know that if they do want to talk someone is here to listen.

It’s useful to find out what the family ‘belief systems’ are. Do they believe your spirit goes to heaven? That you become a star in the sky? That seeing a feather / robin / rainbow means they are close by? It’s important not to use your own frames of reference, as this can be confusing for the child.

Bereavement is a cumulative process. Every loss you encounter will bring up feelings of loss that you have experienced in your own past. It is important to be aware of this and to take care of yourself and your staff.

There are various ‘models’ of grief, but the one we will be using looks at the 5 stages of grief (E Kubler–Ross)

**Primary Phase Children**

Children at this developmental stage have acquired a wider understanding of death and what it entails. They begin to realize that death is the end of a person’s life, that the person who has died won’t return and that life functions have been terminated. By the age of seven the average child accepts that death is an inevitably and that all people including themselves will eventually die.

This understanding can also increase a child’s anxieties regarding the imminent deaths of other people who they are close to. Children of this age are broadening their social networks by attending school and are therefore open to receive both information and misinformation from their peers and social circles.

With this in mind it is important that the cause of death, the funeral and burial process and what happens to the deceased person’s body are explained in a factual and age appropriate manner to the bereaved child. Children will ask many questions and may want to know intricate details pertaining to the death and decomposition of the body. Again, it is vital that children have such details explained to them clearly so that they understand.

At this developmental stage children can empathize with and show compassion for peers that have been bereaved. Children aged between five and ten often copy the coping mechanisms that they observe in bereaved adults and they may try to disguise their emotions in an attempt to protect the bereaved adult. The bereaved child can sometimes feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings. *(Cruse Bereavement Care)*



It’s really important to use the correct language when talking to children following bereavement. Be factual. Don’t say: ‘They fell asleep’, ‘They passed away’, ‘You lost your mum / dad / grandma’ Do say: ‘They died’

School is the place where everything will still be the same for the child at a time when other aspects of their lives may have changed massively. This continuity is really important.

Most people (children included) don’t need to have bereavement counseling. It is a normal process that most people get through with the help of family, friends and school. Initially, they may need some support to understand what is likely to happen in the immediate future. You can help them find some answers. Our natural instinct is to try to stop children feeling upset, but sadly grieving is a process they need to go through. We need to give them permission to grieve, to cry, to be angry and eventually to find a new normal.

If after about 6 months they are still struggling on a daily basis, some specialist bereavement counseling can be put into place.

**Useful information** (including leaflets to download that are age / condition specific):

<https://www.winstonswish.org/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIhtK1n7zJ6AIVybHtCh3jPQZ3EAAYASAAEgIdS_D_BwE>

<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/addressing-grief/addressing-grief-tips-for-teachers-and-administrators>

[https://www.dyingmatters.org/sites/default/files/user/images/Resources/Promo materials/Leaflet\_8\_Web.pdf](https://www.dyingmatters.org/sites/default/files/user/images/Resources/Promo%20materials/Leaflet_8_Web.pdf)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/two-takes-depression/201612/the-dos-and-donts-talking-child-about-death>

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/bereaved-family-friends/supporting-grieving-child/talking-to-children-about-death>

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

**Books for Children and Adults to Read Together
The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back.**Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong. (Therapeutic story).
**Someone Has Died Suddenly.**Mary Williams. (www.suddendeath.org)
**The Secret C: Straight Talking About Cancer**. Julie A.Stokes OBE ([www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk))   **Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine.**(Activity book) Diana Crossley **‘As Big As It Gets’** (Activity book)Winstons Wish

**Books for Younger Children (Nursery and KS1) Goodbye Mousie.**Robie H.Harris
**When Uncle Bob Died**. Althea
**Dear Grandma Bunny**. Dick Bruna **Badgers Parting Gifts**. Susan Varley
**Always and Forever**. Debi Giliori and Alan Durant
**Are You Sad, Little Bear?**A Book About Learning To Say Goodbye. Rachel Rivett

**Books for KS1 and KS2
Flamingo Dream.**Donna Jo Napoli **Fred.**Posy Simmonds
**Granpa**. John Burningham **Why Mum?**Catherine Thornton
**When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death**. Laurie Krasny  **Saying Goodbye to Daddy.**Judith Vigna

**Books for KS2 and KS3
The Cat Mummy**. Jacqueline Wilson
**SAD BOOK.**Michael Rosen
**What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?**Trevor Romain  **Ways to Live Forever.**Sally Nicholls

**Books for KS3 AND KS4
Double Act.**Jacqueline Wilson
**Dustbin Baby**. Jacqueline Wilson
**The Charlie Barber Treatment**. Carole Lloyd
**The Lost Boys’ Appreciation Society**. Alan Gibbons  **The Spying Game.**Pat Moon **‘A Monster Calls’** Patrick Ness