Understanding Young People's responses to a bereavement

Children's age and understanding of death

The following information considers the developmental stage of children's development and how this can impact upon their ability to understand what is happening. Although the information refers to 'death', a child who has experienced a loss will have the same type of understanding.

Very young children and babies

If a significant death occurs in the life of a child aged less than 2 years, they will not have much language to express their loss. However even babies and very young children are aware that people they were attached to have gone and experience the dawning realisation that they are never coming back. Babies can cry inconsolably if they feel unsafe when a parent goes out of the room or leaves them for longer than the baby wants. Permanent loss can be expressed in the same way or through listlessness, quietness, a decrease in activity or lack of sleep.

Age 2-5 years

In this age range children view death as a kind of sleep; the person is alive but in some limited way. They do not fully separate death from life and may believe that the person who died continues to live, for instance in the ground where he or she was buried. They will often ask very practical questions about the activities of the dead person, for instance how they are eating, going to the toilet, breathing or playing. Young children can acknowledge physical death but consider it a temporary or gradual event, reversible and not final. Because they do not understand that death is permanent, they may say 'I know mummy's dead, but she will be coming back for my birthday'

Younger children do not develop strategies to help them remember until they are approximately 7. Children need to be given memory prompts, such as stories repeated over and over, so they are able to recall memories of the person who has died. Without those prompts young children will find it difficult to remember.

Aged 6-12 years

Children in this age range begin to develop a more mature understanding of death and life and are becoming aware that everyone dies one day, including themselves. They want to know more about the actual cause of death. At this age children like to feel that the world is an ordered place with routine and structure playing a significant part. They are beginning to move away from the family to make important relationships with other children and school. The death of someone close can easily throw them back to feeling unsafe and to being more

dependent. They may feel less calm emotionally and more like a younger, preschool child who is up and down in their feelings.

Here are some tips to help you support a bereaved child:

Talk

Children and young people often find it helpful if they can talk about what is happening, helping them to make sense of events and feel less afraid. Even young children are likely to hear reports in the media or overhear adults talking about deaths due to coronavirus, or the risk of death from becoming ill with the virus. It's important to talk about their fears or anxieties honestly and openly in age-appropriate language. It may also help to restrict the amount of media coverage and social media they are exposed to, and balance this with other activities and positive things to focus on. Children's understanding of death varies with their stage of development and it can be helpful to understand why children may respond differently.

Be honest

Give children honest, factual information in language appropriate to their age and level of understanding and be guided by their questions. Children tend to pick up when questions are avoided and may then imagine all kinds of things, causing further anxiety. It's not necessary to go into detail but it will be helpful to explain things that affect them directly, such as why they are being asked to wash their hands regularly and how the virus is spread, why their school has closed, why they can't visit a grandparent or why a parent is working from home.

Acknowledge concerns

Bereaved children may be concerned about someone they know becoming ill or even dying. Explain that some people will have no symptoms and will be fine, most people will experience only a mild form of the virus and will get better, but some people are more vulnerable and so we need to make sure they are protected. Be honest though and don't shy away from explaining that some people may die, as children need to trust that you are being honest and open with them, so that they can ask you other questions with confidence.

Create routines

Currently, keeping to usual, daily routines might be difficult. But routines can be reassuring to children when everything else seems to be disrupted. If you are at home with your child, try to keep to regular routines such as mealtimes, schoolwork, breaks, play and bedtime. Children feel more in control, and therefore less fearful, if given simple clear jobs to do, such as washing their hands properly, or simple jobs around the house.

What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

How to respect feelings without empowering fears

When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, actually exacerbate the youngster's anxiety. It happens when parents, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect her from them. Here are pointers for helping children escape the cycle of anxiety.

1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. And as a by-product of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.

2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that's how she feels—and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she's learned that coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.

3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You can't promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he won't fail a test, that he'll have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at him during show & tell. But you can express confidence that he's going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask him to do something he can't handle.

4. Respect their feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is terrified about going to the doctor because she's due for a shot, you don't want to belittle her fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic**,** help her understand what she's anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."

5. Don't ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions— “Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?” To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: “How are you feeling about the science fair?”

6. Don’t reinforce the child’s fears.

What you don’t want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: “Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of.” Let’s say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time she’s around a dog, you might be anxious about how she will respond, and you might unintentionally send a message that she *should*, indeed, be worried.

7. Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It’s really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the “habituation curve”—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that’s how we get over our fears.

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we’re afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. So another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to a doctor’s appointment, you don’t want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that’s likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.

9. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child’s fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who’s anxious about separating from her parents might worry about what would happen if they didn’t come to pick her up. So we talk about that. If your mom doesn’t come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? “Well I would tell the coach my mom’s not here.” And what do you think the coach would do? “Well he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me.” A child who’s afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. For some kids, having a plan can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Kids are perceptive, and they’re going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can’t handle the stress or the anxiety. I’m not saying to pretend that you don’t have stress and anxiety, but let kids hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.

Get support

If you are struggling with your own reactions, try to get support for yourself. Children and young people are quick to pick up on the distress of others around them, even if the adults are trying to hide their feelings.

For guidance on supporting a bereaved child, please see details below:

Please feel free to contact Mrs Baines who can provide counselling support via telephone on 07595613842, alternatively any queries please email.

Jane.baines@mowbrayprimary.northumberland.sch.uk

Child Bereavement.co.uk

https://www.childbereavementuk.org

Tel: 0800 0288840

Winston's wish

https://www.winstonswish.org/

Tel: 08088 020021

Nelson's Journey

http://www.nelsonsjourney.org.uk/young-people/

Reading Books to support children manage their anxieties.

What's Going on Inside my Head? by Molly Potter, illustrated by Sarah Jennings

ISBN: 9781472959232

Healthy for Life: Self-esteem and mental health by Anna Claybourne, illustrated by Dan Bramall

ISBN: 9781445149806

How Are You Feeling Today? by Molly Potter, illustrated by Sarah Jennings

ISBN: 9781472906090

Ruby's Worry by Tom Percival

ISBN: PB - 9781408892152 HB - 9781408892138 Format: Paperback and Hardback