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Patient information

Your Child's Grief

Information for parents and carers

Bereavement and loss are part of our lives from birth to death. There are many small losses and sometimes bigger ones for which we all need to grieve. For a child, the death of a loved one can be one of the hardest bereavements. It is natural for parents/carers to be anxious and upset for their children. Often parents/carers feel very concerned about how their child is coping and dealing with the bereavement.

Children, like adults, grieve after a loved one has died, and this grief can be very intense and painful. There are three important differences between children's and adults' grief. These are:

- ❖ How children understand death
- ❖ How children express their grief
- ❖ The timing of children's grief



How do children understand grief?

It is difficult for us all to accept the reality of a loss and often children will find it especially hard. Sometimes children might believe that their loved one will come back; this is a normal reaction, and, through time, children will come to understand the 'finality' of the loss.

It is very common for children not to believe that the loved one is really dead. Their understanding can be made even more difficult if they have been told that the loved one is sleeping or lives in the clouds. Children often need matter-of-fact information to help them understand what has happened.

It is natural for parents/carers to try and protect their child from the pain of the loss, but children, like adults, need to be told the truth. Very often, children's fantasies about the death are a lot scarier and worrying than the truth. It is important to provide children with truthful information in a sensitive way. In time, children are able to understand what has happened.

How do children express their grief?

Children, like adults, will often feel shocked, guilt, panic, despair, and anger after the death of a loved one. Sometimes children will appear to be unaffected whilst at other times, they will be very upset, angry, shocked, etc.

Often children will not talk about the death, but they will still be thinking about, and feeling, their grief. Like adults, children can feel run down, tired, forgetful and day-dreamy – this is natural. It is common for children to 'play out' their feelings, rather than to talk about them. It is important to allow children the time, space, and sensitivity to express their grief in their own way.

When do children grieve?

When a loved one dies, children will grieve. But often this grief appears to adults to 'come and go'. It can be very difficult for a child to feel the intense pain of grief for a long time. It is very natural for children to find out about a death and not react in the same way as an adult. It can take weeks or months before some children will ask any questions. This doesn't mean that children are not grieving – they are coping with their pain in their own way.

Sometimes children can feel very anxious about the parent/carer who is looking after them and won't want to upset them.

It is important to understand that children can come in and out of their grief and will often need a lot of patience, care and sensitivity. Grief for children and adults can be a long and very painful journey.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Zig Zag Children's and Young People's Service
Psychological Support Service
The Margaret Centre
Whipps Cross Hospital

Direct Line: **0208 539 5522 ext. 5843 or 4394**
You can leave a message outside office hours on our
answerphone.

Other Helpful Websites:

Child Bereavement UK www.childbereavementuk.org
Winston's Wish www.winstonswish.org