



# NEVER TOO YOUNG TO GRIEVE

**SUPPORTING CHILDREN UNDER 5 AFTER THE DEATH OF A PARENT**

**WINSTON'S  
WISH** 

Giving hope to grieving children

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# WINSTON'S WISH SUPPORTS BEREAVED CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

With more than 100 children bereaved of a parent every single day in the UK, we believe in a society in which every child can get the help they need when someone close to them dies.

A child's early years are a time of development and change which helps shape the rest of their life. From newborn babies needing constant attention and care to curious children seeking new experiences, an immense amount of learning and change happen during this short period of time.

A key focus of early childhood is the relationships that children form with the important people in their lives — usually parents, carers and siblings. Most children will form a strong, secure bond with these people, which enables them to feel safe, and encourages the curiosity that helps them to explore their world.

Bereavement during a child's early years interrupts the attachment that they have with that person. In the absence of strong memories of their own, it can be hard for a young child to remember the person who has died and to feel connected to them.

This booklet is designed for parents, carers, childcare professionals and other adults supporting children up to the age of 5 who have experienced the death of a parent or carer. It offers information and ideas as well as some activities which we hope will benefit children and their families.

Children are never too young to grieve and have sometimes been called 'the forgotten mourners' (Smith, 1999). Despite experiencing such devastating loss in their formative years, with understanding, support and guidance these children can build up their resilience and go on to lead full and flourishing lives.

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Please note that while we refer to the death of a parent throughout this book, the support and advice given is applicable to the death of any carer.





*"Understanding how my children may grieve will help me to be better prepared for all of those questions they are going to throw at me as they get older."*

David (Dad to children aged 1 and 3)

# YOUR OWN GRIEF ADVICE FOR PARENTS

## LIFE WITHOUT YOUR PARTNER

It is important to remember that people react differently when they experience a death. How someone responds to a death is very personal and depends on many different factors. Some of these factors are age, personality, relationships, coping style, past experiences, religious beliefs and cultural background.

It is not uncommon for members of a family to react in different ways to the death of the same person. At different times they may be feeling very different things. Some family members may not show any visible reactions; others may openly show their distress. Often family members try to protect each other: when one person is sad, another may try to support them by appearing cheerful. Although this is quite normal it sometimes makes it difficult for a family to be open about their grief because they may worry about upsetting each other.

Coping with your own feelings after your partner has died can be especially difficult when you are trying to support your child or children. You may feel a range of different emotions: shock, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, tiredness, to name just a few. Such reactions are again quite normal. You may find that you experience a number of these feelings all at the same time, which can make it hard to know how to manage them all. Everyday situations and tasks can feel impossible to achieve.

When a husband, wife or partner dies it is normal to feel lost. Some people have said they feel like a part of them is missing and that they don't know who they are any more. Perhaps one of the hardest things is having to adjust to life as a lone parent. This is a very real challenge as, in many families, partners support each other and often make joint decisions about everyday family life. If parents have separated before a death, grief may feel complicated and there may be additional practical challenges to overcome.

Many people faced with being a lone parent because of a bereavement can feel overwhelmed at first. In the short term there will, of course, be disruption to normal family routines and life may be a bit unfocused. As time goes on, children will do better if routines and boundaries are in place and stay the same. Taking life one step at a time – and being clear, consistent and confident about decisions affecting your children – will help you and your children deal with your loss.

You will be able to support your children most effectively when you look after yourself. This can seem like an impossible task when you're feeling overwhelmed by your own grief and aware, at the same time, that your children need you. You may find family and friends can provide you with invaluable support. Sometimes it can help to talk to someone more neutral and it might help to discuss this with your family doctor, or call the Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline to find out about local support services (see page 40).

It is vital that you give yourself time and space to process your own thoughts and feelings. Getting outside support will make sure that you can respond confidently to both the physical and emotional needs of your children.

## HELPING YOUR CHILDREN

Many adults feel that childhood is a time when children should be free from difficulties and challenging life events. But the reality of our world, and life itself, makes this almost impossible. Many parents will wish to protect their children when a death happens. They think that by not talking about it their children will not be affected and will therefore not need to worry. However, even young children are sensitive to what's going on around them, and they pick up on feelings and atmosphere within the family. They are more likely to worry, or blame themselves, if things are kept from them. They may think they should not talk about the person who has died or show their feelings. This makes grieving more complicated and can lead to other problems.

Children often look to their parents to see how they are expected to react when someone has died. It is not going to damage your children if you cry in front of them, though extreme grief could be frightening for them. It can be useful if you show your feelings rather than pretending that everything is all right or making the subject off limits and give a simple explanation such as:

***'Mummy's feeling sad and crying because Daddy died.'***

***'I really miss him.'***

Saying things out loud helps children to understand and be aware of what is happening in their world and makes children feel included and valued.

This book offers information about the normal grief reactions that very young children may go through. It also aims to give ideas about how parents can support their children. It can be hard to know you've found the right words so we include some suggestions about what parents might say to children at different times and in different situations.



***"Sometimes I wonder what Molly really understands?"***

***I worry about not being able to talk to her about her daddy without crying?***

***Will I just upset her more by talking about him?"***

Trisha (Mum of 3 year old)

# WHAT PARENTS WANT TO KNOW

When parents first speak to us about a death, they often have many questions about what to do in order to help their children.

They are often afraid of getting it wrong or making things worse.

While every parent will face different circumstances and questions, we have tried to cover the more frequently asked questions in this book.

**I FEEL MY SON IS TOO YOUNG TO KNOW – IS HE?** – *See page 6*

**HOW DO I SUPPORT A 3 YEAR OLD?** – *See page 11*

**I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO EXPLAIN – WHERE DO I BEGIN?** – *See pages 14-16*

**I WANT TO BE ABLE TO ANSWER QUESTIONS MY DAUGHTER ASKS ME ABOUT HOW HER DADDY DIED?** – *See page 16*

**I'M WORRIED MY SON WILL FORGET ABOUT HIS MUM** – *See pages 24-26*

**WILL IT FRIGHTEN HER IF WE TALK ABOUT IT?** – *See page 17*

**SHOULD MY 4 YEAR OLD ATTEND HER MUMMY'S FUNERAL?** – *See page 21*

**MY 2 YEAR OLD HASN'T SHOWN ANY EMOTION BUT HAS BECOME VERY DEMANDING. IS THIS NORMAL?** – *See page 10*



# UNDERSTANDING HOW YOUNG CHILDREN GRIEVE

## NORMAL DEVELOPMENT IN UNDER 5S

Babies and young children rely on forming attachments with caregivers to make them feel safe in the world. As they develop, the security they feel in this attachment is key to nurturing the child's ability to explore the world around them and form new relationships.

At first babies will rely on parents for all their needs, including anticipating what a baby wants when they cry. They rely on smell, touch and taste to comfort them and a baby will seek the physical presence of a parent to soothe them.

As babies grow into toddlers and are better able to communicate, their range of needs also grows, and so parents are still needed to make sense of this. They rely on rhythms and routines to help them to predict and make sense of their lives.

From toddlers to young children, they learn not only how to communicate better with their parents, but also how to form friendships and behave in places outside the home, such as nursery, preschool, or school. They will be looking to other adults, as well as their parents, for help with their day-to-day life.

They may go back and forth between thinking that they know it all and needing lots of reassurance. While they can talk, they don't have a good understanding of their feelings and are still learning how to control their behaviour. They rely on adults in their life to look for changes in the way that they act and help them to know what it means. From birth to five years, children undergo the biggest changes in development that they will ever experience. They learn to move, eat, walk, and talk, while learning about how the world works. This can be a challenging and scary time for children, which is why they rely on the safety and comfort of their parents to guide and support them.

From holding their hands, to taking their first steps, to helping them talk about their day, parents play a vital role in early childhood. The role parents play will change as their child changes.

Imagine then the impact the death and sudden absence of a parent will make on a child during these important developmental years.

## WHAT MIGHT I SEE?

The death of a parent is one of the most fundamental losses that a child can experience.

Given how much young children rely on their parents in their formative years, it is perhaps not a surprise to know that the death of a parent will have a huge impact on any child's life.

Children will experience a loss differently – but even little babies will notice that someone who used to make them feel safe and cared for is missing. Although babies and young children might not yet understand what death is, or why it has happened, we know that children are never too young to grieve. Every child will react differently according to their age, personality and how close their relationship was with the person who died. Although there is no definitive checklist we can give you, we can offer guidance on what research and experience tell us. Here are some of the reactions that you might expect or notice from grieving children.



## BABIES 0-12 MONTHS

### What they understand

- Babies experience the death of a parent as the absence of the person who cared for them, though they will not know why.
- Babies can feel strong emotions but they are too young to be aware of what these are or what is causing them.
- Babies will respond to changes in the emotions of the people around them, although they will not understand why.

### What you may notice

- A baby's grief is expressed through loss of security and this may be seen in changes in their eating and sleeping habits.
- Babies may cry more and generally appear less settled, more irritable and even inconsolable.
- Babies may become more clingy to the adults in their life.
- These emotions are expressed in their body language.

### What may help

- Where possible, try to keep their routines the same as they were before the death. This will help them to feel safe and secure.
- Babies experience the world mainly through their senses and physical sensations, so try to surround them with familiar smells, textures, sounds, rhythms and tastes. This could be by giving them an item of clothing worn by their parent that still bears their scent or the feel of a special blanket that they like to sleep with.

## TODDLERS (1 YEAR - 3 YEARS)

### What they understand

- Toddlers may be aware that someone is missing, but will not fully understand why.
- They will not understand the finality of death and so may expect the person who has died to come back.
- Toddlers will notice the changes in their life caused by the death, particularly changes relating to their routines and care.
- They will react to other people's emotional state, which they may not understand.

### What you may notice

- They may try to search for the lost person.
- Toddlers will show their feelings through changes in behaviour and play.
- You may see some angry behaviour or tantrums e.g. throwing toys.
- Toddlers may become more withdrawn.
- You may notice more crying.
- They may become clingier towards adults in their life.
- Their eating, sleeping and toileting habits may change.
- Toddlers may demonstrate anxiety in the company of strangers.

### What may help

- Pay attention to what young children are doing.
- Take them seriously.
- Listen and help them feel that they are not alone.
- Try to keep their routines the same.
- Talk to them repeatedly about what has happened very simply.



## AGES 3-5

### What they understand

- Young children will still struggle to understand what dead means.
- They may still expect the return of the person who died.
- Older children may understand some of the physical reasons behind a death but will still find this difficult to grasp.
- Children will miss the person who has died.
- They may be able to recognise some feelings but are unlikely to be able to link it to their grief.

### What you may notice

- Children will listen to what adults are saying, even if they do not understand what it means.
- Children may learn to use words associated with death without understanding them.
- Children will take explanations literally.
- They may ask the same question time and time again.
- They may think that they did something to cause the death.
- You may notice changes in behaviour and play as they act out their feelings.
- Increased anger, shown in tantrums or shouting. This is often linked to anxiety.
- Increased fears and worries.
- They may experience difficulty separating from their parents or carers.
- Some young children have difficulty concentrating on their activities.

- Some children may become withdrawn from friends and can find it more difficult to relax and enjoy themselves.
- Their eating, sleeping and toileting habits may change to those of a younger child.
- A child may develop physical symptoms like tummy aches and headaches.
- Some children may not appear to react much at first.

### What may help

- Love, comfort and reassurance to build a child's confidence and help them to feel safe again.
- Reassurance that they are cared for and who will look after them.
- Explaining in simple, concrete terms that reflect their developmental stage.
- Keeping routines and boundaries.
- Voicing emotions for them.
- Learning how it affects other people helps them to learn to express their own feelings and feel less alone – emotional literacy.
- Remembering. This might include talking about the person who has died or keeping things that belonged to that person.
- Participating in family rituals to say goodbye.
- Continuing to talk to them as they grow older.

Bear in mind that there is no right or wrong way for children to grieve. Bereaved children often regress in some areas and may act like younger children. This is not a reflection of how well they are developing; it is a reaction to their grief.

While many older children experience their grief differently to adults, this is even more so for younger children. At Winston's Wish we often talk of children 'puddle jumping' or 'jumping in and out of puddles of grief' to describe their grieving process. This means that while children can feel sad and miss the person who has died, they can find themselves in and out of those puddles of grief and there may be times when they feel ok or even happy.

Even very young children try to understand death. A child who does not fully understand the concept of death can expect it to be reversible. Children's TV characters often jump up and come to life again even when some calamity befalls them and they appear to die. How often might your child have heard someone say that a phone/battery/car has died? All of these things can be mended, fixed or replaced. To a young child death will not appear permanent. Often a child this age may say:

***'I know Daddy died, but will he come to my birthday party?'***

The finality of death is yet to be understood.

Young children see themselves at the centre of a world that revolves around their needs. It is therefore not uncommon for children to be worried about who will read their bedtime story or what they are having for tea. Their reaction does not mean that they do not care or are unaffected by what has happened. It is important that you maintain as normal a routine as possible for your child. They will respond to a steady, loving and familiar environment which will enable them to continue to grow confidently.

***"My daddy's heart was attacked."***

***"I don't want to go to Devon [confusing it with heaven].... People cannot come back from Devon. They have to stay there with God."***

Freddie (aged 3 ½)

Young children are also at the age of 'magical thinking' when they believe they can influence things by their thoughts or actions. This means that while they try to make sense of what has happened, they may believe that something they did caused the person's death:

***'I shouted at Daddy which made him sad so he died.'***

They can also believe that their actions can reverse a death:

***'If I'm really good will Daddy come back?'***

This is more likely to happen when children do not have all the information they need and are trying to fill in the blanks. Reassurance and explanations that are appropriate for the child's age can help them to understand that they are not responsible.

One of the most difficult aspects of a young child's grief is that they are likely to ask the same questions over and over again. They are trying to make sense of the death. Children are naturally curious and they want to understand what is happening in their world. Often younger children need time to process what they have been told.

These repeated questions are not a sign that your explanations are not good enough or that they have not heard what you have explained to them the first time; it can often mean they just need more time to make sense of, and process, the information they have been given. This might mean you have to repeat the information time and time again and patience may well be required.



When a child this young experiences the death of a parent, it is particularly important that they are helped to know about and remember the person, as this is an integral part of their history that will grow and develop with them (see pages 17 and 25).

As your child grows, their ability to understand and use speech to express themselves will also develop. This will lead to new opportunities to talk about the person who died and help them to build their own 'story'.

With a growing understanding can come a readiness for new information and with it, new questions from your child. This may be upsetting and daunting for you. Again, it is important to keep your responses honest, clear and simple using basic language. If you are unsure and you do not know how to answer, it is okay to say so. It is better to acknowledge the question rather than pretend you did not hear it.

Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help your child to deal with change. Young children need adults to help them make sense of their changing world and provide reassurance and stability.

This is not the end of their childhood, it is the start of a different one.

*"When it's my birthday, will Mummy be back?"*



# TELLING A YOUNG CHILD THAT SOMEONE HAS DIED

## HOW MUCH DO I TELL THEM?

Many people understandably worry about talking to children about death. You might worry about what to say, about saying the wrong thing, making things worse or being asked questions that you feel you cannot answer. The easiest way to talk to children is to be direct, clear and honest. Remember, nothing you can say will make it worse – the worst has already happened.

It is often easier for children to be given information in small chunks rather than all in one go and simple messages often need to be repeated several times.

Think of it like a jigsaw...

***'Daddy has died.' 'It's really sad.'***

Young children start to build jigsaw puzzles with only one or two pieces and as they grow these puzzles get more complicated before the full picture is revealed. Very young children might only need one or two pieces of key information. As the days, months and years pass they will need more information, such as how the person died and what that means to them. Each child will be ready to hear information at different times: some children might be ready straight away whereas others may need much more time; be led by them. You may notice that their play is based around scenarios where people die or their behaviour is different. They may even ask questions themselves. These are all signs that children are ready to hear more and add more pieces to their puzzle.

***'Daddy has died.' 'It's really sad.'***

***'He died because his heart stopped working.'***

As a parent, your natural instinct will be to protect your children. Sometimes it can be hard to share difficult information about a person's death, especially when it seems it will cause your child more distress. Any suggested words given in this book will need to be adapted to suit individual situations and the age of each individual child. It is not a question of being brutally frank: what is important is to explain things in language that children can understand.



At Winston's Wish, children continue to tell us how important it is to be given honest information. That does not mean that it all needs to be said at once. One piece of information at a time is fine. When children are not told things they can feel left out and are often confused by lack of information. Remember that sometimes this can result in them blaming themselves for what happened.

## THINKING ABOUT WORDS

It is helpful to remember that young children are very matter of fact and will receive the information you give them in this way. It is probably harder for you to tell a child about a death than it is for the child to hear what is said. It is impossible to predict how children will take the news and their reactions may range from great distress to not seeming to be bothered. They may say:

***'What's for tea?' or 'Can I go and play now?'***

Try not to be upset as these are very normal reactions and do not mean that the child is uncaring. Part of helping your child to understand what has happened is about developing their language. When we talk about what has happened to a person after they have died, it can often be difficult to describe. Euphemisms are often used such as:

***Asleep   Lost   Gone   Passed away   Gone on a long journey***

***Gone up to heaven   Is a star   Resting in peace   Is an angel***

***Will always watch over you***

While these words may be used to gently explain the idea of death to a child and protect them from the harsher reality, they can be very confusing for a young child to hear. This confusion can lead the child to misunderstand, which makes it harder for them to make sense of what has happened. Remember that young children will take words and explanations literally:

***'We have lost daddy.' ... 'When can we go and find him?'***

***'Daddy fell asleep.' ... 'When will he wake up?'***

***'Mummy has gone.' ... 'Where has she gone?'***

Though many adults often find it hard to use the word 'died', it is easier for children to understand. They will value your honesty and a trusting relationship will allow them to talk openly to you in the future. After a death, children may hear adults use lots of new words.

These words mean important things and using them with a young child is helpful, as long as they are used consistently and accurately. While a very young child may not initially understand what the word 'dead' or 'died' means, they will know that it is different to 'gone' or 'lost' which they have probably heard before. They will learn the meaning of new words as they get older and understand more about the death.

## STARTING CONVERSATIONS

This may be the hardest thing you have ever had to do.

In order to prepare your child for what you are about to tell them, try and find a quiet time and space, ensure you have their attention and start to connect them to the news you are about to share:

***'Emily, I've got something sad to tell you.'***

***'You know that Mummy has been in hospital because she was very, very ill...'***

Once you have started this conversation, it is important to give them the hardest news first:

***'Mummy died today.'***

***'Sadly the doctors couldn't make her better and she died today.'***

This might seem like a blunt way of explaining such a difficult event to a child but as we mention in the previous section, it is important to keep information clear and factual so that there is no confusion.

For some children, this might be enough information for now, but for those who are ready to hear more, a little more detail about how the person died can be shared.

***'Daddy was driving in his car when it crashed into another car. Daddy's body was hit really hard by the car and that made his heart and the rest of his body stop working, so he died.'***

***'Mummy's illness was called cancer. Mummy's type of cancer was in her chest. The doctors could not make Mummy's cancer better. The cancer made Mummy's heart weak so it couldn't pump blood around her body. This made her breathing stop.'***

It might feel strange to use medical language, like cancer, with a very young child. Although their understanding of these words may be limited, we have found it useful to use these terms to help children to see that very few illnesses lead to a death and not every case of a specific – like breast cancer – necessarily leads to someone dying. You might prefer to explain that someone was very, very, very ill, which caused them to die, as opposed to having a minor ailment such as a cold. Either way, it is important to help children to make this distinction as this will avoid any worries they might develop about illnesses in the future.

A very young child may find it hard to process what this really means, but the important thing is that they have heard the facts from someone they love and trust. As your child grows, their understanding of this information will change and they will be ready to hear more detail. We know that there are some types of death that can feel particularly hard to talk about, like suicide or murder. While the same principles apply, there are some specific resources available through the Winston's Wish Helpline and website. These provide different ideas about how to talk more specifically about these types of deaths.

## WHAT HAPPENS TO SOMEONE AFTER THEY HAVE DIED?

How you choose to explain death or an afterlife will depend on your own cultural, religious or personal beliefs. These beliefs will help you to decide whether or not to talk to children about such things and how to describe them.

Care needs to be taken when trying to explain things that a child cannot see or experience (for example, a person's soul). Just ensure you consider how a young child may interpret your words and whether they may cause comfort or confusion. Here are some possible explanations and children's responses:

***'Mummy has gone to heaven.' ... 'Can I visit her in heaven?'***

***'His spirit will always be with us.' ... 'Can I see his spirit? Where is it?'***

***'Mummy has died and she can't come back.' ... 'I want to die so I can see her.'***

***'Daddy is happy now he is with God.' ... 'Was Daddy sad being with me?'***

Try to explain a little bit at a time and check that they have understood what you have said. You may need to clearly explain that now a person has died there are things that they can and cannot do:

***'We can't see them or touch them but we can still talk about them.'***

If your child asks you where people go when they die, answer honestly to reflect your own beliefs. If your beliefs are strong then share them. If you are unsure yourself, it is better to be honest and say that you do not know.

***'Nobody knows for sure... some people think they go to heaven to be close to God. Other people think they're born again in a new body.'***

***'What we do know is that when someone dies, their body stops working and they don't need it anymore. Nobody knows what happens to the person themselves.'***

If you don't believe in a life after death, the most useful thing you can do is ask your child what they think. Depending on their age, children are often able to offer a few ideas of their own and then you can tailor your answer to suit them. Keep it simple and to the point.



# BUILDING A STORY

In order to be able to make sense of a death, a young child needs enough factually correct information for their story to make sense. If important pieces of information are missing, they will make them up and their story could be wrong. It may be even scarier than the real story, especially if it remains unshared. It can be really hard to know what your child may have understood and what story they might have formed in their head.

Firstly, try to put yourself in your child's shoes. Think about what they might have taken from the conversations you have already had with them. This might make it easier for you to work out what you need to tell them. Ask yourself what you have really told them, rather than what you think you have told them. A good way to test this is to ask yourself:

***What would my child say if I asked them what had happened?***

***Will they be correct?***

***Do they have enough information for their age?***

You may also want to consider what they have seen, done or noticed in relation to the death:

***Were they there when the person died?***

***When were they told?***

***Have they said goodbye to the person?***

***"At first I told my son that we had lost Daddy.***

***He became really angry at me and insisted that we all go out and find him.***

***That is when I understood how important it was to use the word 'died' to help him understand what had happened to his daddy."***

Kim (Mum of a 3 year old)

You may find it helpful to ask for support from one of your child's carers – a childminder, nanny, your child's key person at preschool or nursery or their teacher. Perhaps they can offer you feedback about anything your child says. This may help you to gauge your child's understanding, worries or concerns.

You might find that it is helpful to play with your child or draw pictures of what has happened to the person who has died. Parents are often surprised by just how much their children know (even if they have not been told) and how much they have misunderstood. Helping them to clarify what their story looks like, however simple it is, will help your child to trust that you will be there to support them, even in the toughest of times.





## USING EVERYDAY LIFE TO EXPLAIN DEATH

Although the idea of death is hard for young children to fully understand, they may have been observing the process of life and death within their environment.

### **Changing seasons**

#### **Dead and alive flowers, plants and leaves**

#### **Dead and alive insects**

#### **They may have experienced the death of a pet**

Observing these natural occurrences can assist children to explore these everyday life cycles and can help them to learn more about what dying and death mean.

Encourage them to look at the differences between dead and alive plants or bugs:

#### **What does it look like?**

#### **Is it moving?**

#### **Is it breathing?**

#### **Has it changed in appearance?**

#### **What does it feel like?**

#### **Does it look or feel different?**

By helping children to note these differences you can start to help them to understand the difference between dead and alive people as well.

This awareness will help children to make more sense of their story and help them to piece together why a person has died.

## CREATIVE ACTIVITY

### USING STORIES TO HELP CHILDREN TO UNDERSTAND AND DISCUSS DEATH

Young children often love stories and use the pictures and words to learn about their own world.

There are many lovely stories for young children that discuss the idea of life and death. Sharing one of these stories with your child might help them to start to make sense of what has happened and feel less alone and scared. It may also help you to find a way to explain difficult things to them.

Many stories for young children have metaphors that you can use to help your child learn about and explore the idea of death. The story does not have to be about bereavement: it might explore different feelings or missing someone. Your child might have a favourite story that you can adapt to what has happened. Remember, you do not have to explain a metaphor; the most important thing is having a way to talk to your child. Refer to page 41 and download our reading list from [winstonswish.org/ntytg](http://winstonswish.org/ntytg) for story ideas.

## CREATIVE ACTIVITY

### USING PLAY TO MAKE SENSE OF THINGS

So much of a young child's life revolves around play and for a good reason – it is how they learn about their world.

It is likely that play will be one of the best tools that you can use to help your child to understand what life is like now someone has died.

Use everyday toys to get a game started. If they want to pretend that a cushion is a hospital or a banana is a phone, then go with it. They might like to dress up and role play an event. Younger children might need a bit of encouragement to join in with a game, but they will have their own way of playing too.

You can use the characters in the game to get an idea of what the child already knows:

#### **Oh, no! Teddy's in hospital. What happened?**

You can also use play as a way to build a child's understanding:

#### **This little dinosaur is feeling sad because the big dinosaur has died.**

All this will help your child to process what has happened. The only rule of play is to be led by your child.

# HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES

## SAYING GOODBYE

There are many different ways to say goodbye to someone who has died.

This might include attending a funeral or other religious ceremonies or memorial services (see page 21).

To begin with there may be an opportunity for your child to visit the funeral home or chapel of rest to view the body of the person who has died. This often leads to the question: should a child view the body?

There is no straightforward answer. You will need to decide if you wish to see your loved one. This will be a very personal decision, based on your own family, cultural and religious beliefs.

If you do decide to go ahead, you may choose to visit on your own first to say your own personal and private goodbye. This will also help you to know what to expect so that you can prepare your child. You will know if it feels right to offer your child the opportunity to visit as well. If you are unsure, here are a few possible benefits for children:

- **It can offer the child a chance to say goodbye.**
- **It can help a child to understand what being dead means. If a child has the chance to see that a person's body no longer moves, breathes or feels warm, it often helps them to realise the difference between being dead and being alive.**
- **If the child last saw the person who died in hospital, surrounded by lots of tubes, it might be comforting to see that person more peaceful and no longer in pain.**

The decision to view a body can feel daunting and there might be several factors you may wish to consider such as:

- **Will the coffin or casket be fully open or partially closed?**
- **How did that person die? What might their body look like? Think about whether any injuries or bruising would be visible. Funeral directors might be able to offer some advice about how best to present a body.**
- **Who will be there to support you and your child before and after the viewing?**

# PREPARING TO VIEW A PERSON'S BODY

If you do decide to support your child to see the body of the person who died, you will need to think about how to prepare them. We know that if a child is well prepared, they are more likely to have a positive experience. There are several important things to consider.

## INFORMATION

What does the child know about viewing the person's body? You might need to explain:

### Where you will go?

Tell your child where you can go to visit the body. Is it in the house, the funeral home, a chapel of rest?

### What the room might be like

*'It might be cold, it might smell funny, it might be dark.'*

### What the body might look like

*'Mummy's body will be lying down in a long box called a coffin and she will look a bit different. She cannot talk, see you or feel anything. She will have her eyes closed but she won't open them or wake up. Her skin will be white or grey and might feel cold to touch.'*

### Who will be there to look after them?

*'Aunty Jean will come with us. If you want to leave the room then just tell me and she will take you outside.'*

### What they can do to say goodbye

Your child might need some ideas about how to say goodbye. This could include giving a kiss or holding hands, as well as drawing a picture or putting some stickers on the coffin.

## REACTIONS

The response to viewing a body can be equally as varied as receiving the news of the death. Your child will need comfort and reassurance that their reactions are ok. They may need to know that it is ok if they want to touch Daddy's skin or blow a kiss to Mummy but also to know that they do not have to do this if they do not want to. The difference in the way the body looks and feels will help the child to understand what dead means, which is part of making sense of what has happened.



## ATTENDING A FUNERAL

Involving your child in the preparations for the funeral will help them to understand what is happening on the day.

Depending on the age of your child, consider if there may be one or two different ways that you can offer to encourage them to contribute to the arrangements for the funeral:

**Would they like to help select the coffin?**

**Do they want to put something special in the coffin?**

**Can they help choose what the person will wear?**

**Can they help you to choose the headstone or commemorative plaque?**

**Is there a possession of the person they would like to keep – a favourite jumper, scarf or hat?**

**Can they help you to select the colour of the flowers or a piece of music for the service?**

The decision of whether or not a child should attend a funeral, ceremony or other memorial service is different for every family. It can be really helpful to include young children. The ceremony and people who are present help them understand the significance of what has happened. When they are older, this will form part of their story of what happened and they will value having been part of that goodbye. If a child is going to be there, then they need to be prepared for what to expect. This might include what they will see, how people may behave and plans for who will take care of them if they need to leave part way through.

***'A funeral is a time for people to say goodbye to someone who has died. The body of the person who died is in a coffin, which is something to carry the body in. People choose music and songs that the person liked or which have important words, and someone will talk about the person who died, what they were like, and what they meant to everybody. We choose flowers for a funeral to make it beautiful.'***

While there are many aspects of a funeral that are described in this book, the concept of burials and cremation can be particularly difficult to explain. While it might seem daunting to explain this to a young child, their curiosity will lead them to wonder about what happens to a body after a death, and it is better that they can learn about it from someone they trust. Try to remember to use simple, clear words (see page 14 for more advice on language) and do not be surprised if young children ask questions or repeat things that you have said – it is their way of making sense of it.

It is important that the child has a clear exploration about what being dead means (see page 18), including the person not needing their body any more and not feeling pain. It might be helpful to repeat this to the child during or after the ceremony.

Here are a few ideas of phrases and words that you could use. Remember, younger children might only need this information a bit at a time. It might also help to draw or use toys to act out what you are saying.



## BURIAL

*'At the funeral Mummy's body will be in the coffin. It will come in a special big car and grown-ups will carry the coffin inside.'*

*After we have said goodbye to her at the service in the church, grown-ups who are important to Mummy will carry her coffin outside and it will be put into a hole in the ground. Then the people who say goodbye and put flowers or a handful of soil on top of the coffin before they leave.*

*Remember Mummy has died so she will no longer feel anything and she doesn't need her body any more because it stopped working. After everyone has gone, the hole is covered over with soil. Mummy's name will be put onto a gravestone, so we can go there to put flowers and to think about her whenever we want. You might feel like crying, or you might not. You might see other people cry.'*

## CREMATION

*'At the funeral, Mummy's body will be in the coffin and it will come in a special big car and grown-ups will carry the coffin inside.'*

*After we have said our goodbyes to Mummy, some music will play and a curtain will go around the coffin and it will be moved to a very hot room, when it will be turned to ash by fire.*

*Remember Mummy has died so she will no longer feel anything and she doesn't need her body any more because it stopped working.*

*A while later, Mummy's ashes will be given to us in a jar called an urn. Sometimes people bury the ashes in a hole in the ground. Other people spread them in a special place and some people just keep them at home. We can choose what to do with Mummy's ashes.'*

When a child attends a funeral they are able to see all the people who loved the person who has died. It offers them and everyone around them the opportunity to say goodbye which is so important for the future and for coming to terms with loss.

With planning, thought and discussion, a funeral does not have to be a scary event for children.





## LEARNING ABOUT FEELINGS

All children, no matter what age, will experience a range of emotions. Usually they learn how to describe these feelings through play and watching others. Following a bereavement, they will experience stronger feelings than they have known before and they may need some extra help to express these.

Children are curious and will look to other people in their lives to see how they react and understand what that means. While your instinct might be to hide your emotions to protect your children from further pain, showing them how you feel from time to time will help them to learn. If a child sees you feeling upset, it might be helpful to name your feelings and explain why:

***'Daddy's feeling sad today because I'm missing Mummy.'***

If you notice that your child is struggling, help them to label their own emotions too:

***'You look like you're feeling cross.'***

Using these words in everyday conversations will help children to become familiar with them and feel confident using them themselves.

Drawings can also help children to explore what different expressions mean. It might be as simple as drawing pictures of faces and asking your child how each one is feeling, or asking them to draw a happy face or a sad face.

You may find that your child's questions bring tears to your eyes and it might be useful to let them know that it is not what they have said that made you sad. Instead, you might say:

***'I am sad because Daddy died and talking about it has helped some of my sadness come out.'***

It is important for children to not only know about feelings but understand that they are ok and will not last forever. Young children can worry that sadness will never go away or that someone might not stop crying. You can reassure them that it is natural to cry when we are sad, but that tears run out and stop after a while. Encourage them to have happy times: play and friendships are an important part of their lives as well.

## CREATIVE ACTIVITY

### OGLIES - TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS

Ooglies are characters with goggly eyes that can be made from just about anything – lollipop sticks, plasticine, playdough, pipe cleaners, felt; whatever you can find.

You and your child can make a character each. Remember: Ooglies can look like anything. The most important thing is sharing the activity together; it will help to relax and reassure your child.

Ooglies can be used to start conversations with children about what has happened or what they might be feeling. As this is done using a character, i.e. it is the Ooglie's feelings that you discuss rather than the child's, it makes it easier for the child to consider what is happening.



For more guidance about using Ooglies, please visit [winstonswish.org/ntytg](http://winstonswish.org/ntytg)

## MAKING A MEMORY BOX

A memory box provides a special place that your child can keep and treasure all kinds of things that remind them of the person who has died. They can customise it to make it more personal and fill it with photos, letters and objects that remind them of their experiences with that person. Some very young children may not have many memories of that person and so will rely on you to give them some things that will help them to think about that person as they grow up.

It helps a child to feel special if they have their own unique memory box. There might be lots of things that they want to remember. As time passes though, they may find it harder to recall some of these different memories.

- Help your child to fill their memory box with items that remind them of their parent, and times they spent together. It could be a parent's watch, or tie, maybe a scarf or their purse. You could include the lipstick they wore, a postcard from a holiday you went on together or a favourite CD they always listened to. How about their passport or a pair of glasses they wore? Then, you can help your child to remember by looking through the wonderful collection of memories in the box!
- Try not to simply fill your child's memory box with random bits and bobs... instead, make sure that each object has a story or memory attached to it.
- You might find it helpful to write a note for each object to explain the story or memory behind it. This can be shared with your child as they grow.



# CREATING MEMORIES

***How do you help a child to remember a parent that they did not get a chance to know themselves?***

Many parents worry that their child will be too young to remember the person who died and they will soon forget them. Memories of early childhood are often few and far between. But even if a child struggles to form their own memories of a person, this does not mean that they still cannot be part of their lives. There are many ways to record memories to help your child to get to know the person who has died. Early memories are often simple and children will rely on other people to fill in the gaps. This could start with talking about the person who has died and thinking about their place within the family. Memories of that person can be shared in everyday conversation:

***'Daddy used to love sausages for tea too.'***

## MEMORY BOXES

What young children often find most helpful is to have objects to help them to connect with the person who has died. This might mean saving things that used to belong to that person e.g. an old jumper or T-shirt, a special hat or hair band.

Young children respond to things that they can touch, smell and see that remind them of that person. Photographs, videos, lockets of hair, a watch, jewellery or a favourite aftershave/perfume could help them to think about that person.

Sometimes children like to have a special place for these keepsakes. This can also be useful if adults are saving these for a very young child or a baby to look at when they are older. Memory boxes are a useful resource here, but there might be other places that you choose to store these special memories, for example a shoe box or a drawer.

## PHOTO ALBUMS, SCRAPBOOKS OR PHOTO BOOKS

Photo albums or books can capture a wide range of information about the family and the person who died. You may wish to insert items in your books in the correct date order to create a coherent story. This can help young children to put these memories with their own memories, but you do not have to do it this way. Many people have scrapbooks or memory boxes full of different objects, photos and descriptions of a person that are placed there as and when they feel able, or have the time to do it. While you are dealing with your own grief, you may not feel that such things are a priority. Remember – you do not have to do all of this at once. Children might be happy to have just a few things at first and you can save other books, photos or memories to share with them as they grow.

What is important is the conversations that happen around these books, albums or boxes. This can be an ongoing project; there is no end point but memories of that person will develop and grow. All of these items, stories and mementoes will become very important to a growing child and will help your child to secure a continuing bond with the person who has died. These nuggets of information can be used to help children to hold on to connections that they had with the person who died and, with the help of other family members, they can learn more about the person and how they felt about them. See page 26 for further creative ideas.

***"I want us to be able to talk about their mummy. I don't want them to forget the memories they have and I want to share my memories with them as well. I have started to make a special book for them both. We have also collected some special items that we will put in their memory boxes."***

Mo (Dad of 2 year old twins)



## MAKING A LANTERN TO USE TO REMEMBER THE PERSON WHO DIED

There are many different ways to help children to remember someone who has died. Young children find it much easier to have objects to remind them of someone, like the items in their memory box. There are other ways of using creative tasks to help them to talk about and remember a special person. A Chinese paper lantern is a gentle but fun activity that gives young children some space to talk, while being creative. Once made, many children like to hang their lanterns somewhere special, perhaps in their bedroom.

By using a battery candle, they can turn on the light in the lanterns when they want to remember or feel close to the person who died.

For downloadable instructions on how to make a lantern, please visit [winstonswish.org/ntytg](http://winstonswish.org/ntytg)



## MAKING A SCRAPBOOK TO TELL THE STORY OF A PERSON'S LIFE

You may consider making a photo book, photo album or scrapbook to tell the story of a person's life.

There are online companies who can create your photo book. Select your photos and upload them from your computer on to the chosen website. You can select your own layout, use templates to assist you and add text boxes to record dates, messages or memories. The book will then be printed for you.

Scrapbooks can be an easy, and perhaps cheaper, way to record memories. You could record the story of the person's whole life from before the child was born or their life with the child. You might decide to:

- Include photographs of their family, holidays and birthdays.
- Write out memories and stories of their life before they died.
- Think about how they felt about becoming a parent.
- Note any special gifts they bought – first teddy, first outfit?
- What did they think, feel or say about their child?
- What did they like to do with their child?
- What was their favourite game, hobby, music or story?

Scrapbooks and photo books can help young children to feel connected to that person, as well as form a narrative of what they were like. Younger children might rely on you to do things for them until they are old enough to join in. Some older children might like to include their own special items or draw their own pictures.

## RESPONDING TO DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR

Children use behaviour to express themselves and make sense of things long before they are able to say what they think or feel.

Every child is different, and some children might shout and scream whereas others might remain quiet and clingy. Some of these reactions can include:

### SEPARATION ANXIETY

While young children can often be worried about leaving their parents, for example to go to nursery or be looked after by a friend, they usually find this easier after they have done it a few times.

Following a death, your child might become more clingy than usual and be reluctant to be apart from you. This could mean that they cry and hold on to you each time you try to drop them off with their carer. They may even become upset when you leave a room at home and follow you everywhere. There are many different reasons for this to happen: it is often linked to worries that having lost one important person in their life, another one might also leave as well. This can be very difficult for parents to see, especially if your child has not acted like this before.

Try to be patient with your child and offer them lots of cuddles and reassurance that you will be back later.

Young children often find it easier to have something comforting from home to carry with them, for example a teddy or a blanket. Some parents have found that having matching toys to share with their child can also help, e.g. two identical toy cars, one for the child to keep with them and one for the parent. This helps children to use the object to feel connected to their parent. There are many different objects that can be used for this purpose, including cuddly toys, blankets, jewellery and clothing. Some people like to sew a little cross or a 'kiss' inside a pocket or a sleeve so the child can touch it and think of their parent.

You can choose what best suits your child. This reaction is often temporary and childcare professionals will have some ideas about how to help as well.

### ANGER

Anger can be shown in lots of different ways in young children and while there are many causes, it is often rooted in worries and anxieties, for example who will look after them now an important person has died? Some young children cry when they are angry, others hit, shout, spit, bite, have a tantrum or a combination of all. Occasionally young children can do things to hurt themselves: they may hit their head against a wall or bite their hands. Of course it is not uncommon to see some of these behaviours in young children who are not grieving and it can be hard to distinguish between which behaviours relate to grief and which relate to their age.

As mentioned on page 8, one of the things that helps children to feel safe in their world are boundaries. These rules help children to understand and predict what happens in their day-to-day life – even if they do not like it. This means that if your child would have been asked to sit on the step or be told to say sorry for shouting before a death, it's helpful to continue with similar boundaries after a death. This might feel harsh, especially when you understand the reason behind this behaviour, but it will help children to feel safe and contained rather than out of control, which is what they might be feeling. For slightly older children, you might be able to talk to them about their feelings after they have calmed down:

***'I wonder if you were hitting because you are feeling cross that Mummy died?'***

Children who might be too young to benefit from clear boundaries yet might just need to be told 'no biting' so they know their behaviour is not ok and then cuddled to help them to calm down. Every child will be different and your approach will vary, so trust your instincts and do what feels right.



## DIFFICULTIES SLEEPING

Young children often experience broken sleep and/or difficulties getting to sleep but after a death it is quite common for this to become more of a problem than before.

Children may no longer want to sleep in their own beds, be harder to settle to sleep and may wake in the night seeking comfort from you. This can be especially difficult for you as you are not getting the rest you need and tired children can often lead to more challenging behaviour the next day. Again, there are lots of possible reasons for this but it is often linked to worries that someone else in their life may die or that they might not wake up (especially if they were told 'Daddy went to sleep'). They may just be missing the person who used to be there to tuck them in and read them a story. Babies might be particularly restless at night because they are seeking that familiar touch, smell and sound of a person who is no longer there. They may have relied on that person to soothe them back to sleep and they do not yet know how to do it themselves. Even if you have always been your baby's main caregiver, you are most probably grieving yourself and may find it harder to respond to your baby's needs, which the baby will sense and find unsettling.

There are many different ways to manage sleep difficulties but the first step is to make sure that you carry on with (or maybe introduce) a regular routine at bedtime. This could be as simple as a book before bed or a cuddle and milk in the same chair each night. This predictable pattern will help your child to feel safe and settled. Some children might benefit from having a comforting blanket to snuggle up with (which could be an item of clothing which smells like the person who died); wrapping them in it can give extra security. Familiar toys can also have the same effect. Remember to offer lots of reassurance and maybe get them to focus on something nice that they are going to do the next day.

***'When you wake up, we can have your favourite cereal for breakfast.'***

***'Maybe tomorrow we can go to the park.'***

This can help them to take their mind away from any worries. Do not forget to let other people (e.g. childcare professionals or carers) know about any sleep disruption, as this will impact on how they are the following day.





## REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOURS

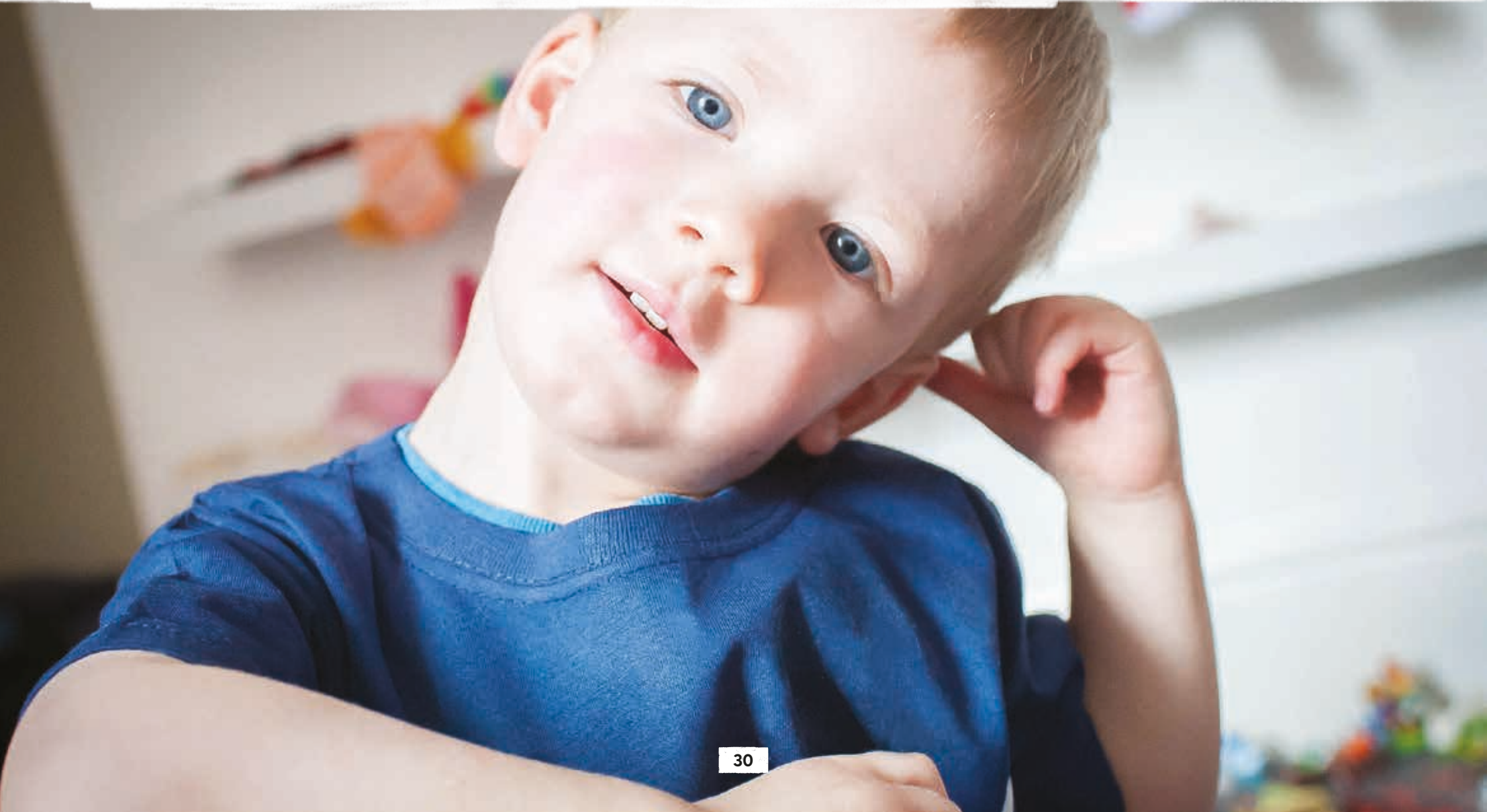
Following a death, young children can often behave as if they were a much younger child. This can be seen in a number of different ways. A previously toilet trained child may revert to wetting and soiling accidents; a preschool child may have toddler tantrums; a baby may become fussy with food and drinks or an articulate child may start to speak less fluently. This can feel very frustrating for you as you may think that you need to teach your child these skills all over again, at a time when you do not have much energy to do so. Often, a child's regression is a temporary reaction to their grief; they might feel less able to do things as they are distracted while trying to make sense of their feelings and loss.

Patience and reassurance are key here. While it's important for children to try to do things themselves (like going to the toilet) you might need to remind them or help them more than usual. Try to keep routines the same to help them know what to expect and relearn what to do. Involve other people who care for them to make sure that they are using the same approach as well. While you might need to be a bit more flexible with some aspects of their care, try to remember that it is not forever. If you have ongoing concerns, a GP or health visitor will be able to offer some support.

These are only a few examples of behavioural changes that you might see in young children following a death. Every child will react differently. Remember that you are not to blame for these changes; it is how young children express themselves. Do not forget to ask for help when you need it, and take care of yourself so you are strong enough to support your child.



# THE FUTURE



## HOW WILL IT BE FOR MY CHILD AS THEY GROW UP?

A child who is bereaved at a very young age will only be able to think about it in terms of their own world view, and this view will be limited by their age and understanding.

We have talked about how helping a young child manage a death is about finding ways for us, as adults, to translate what has happened into a form that means something to the child. This might mean giving them honest information, at the time that they need it.

If these basic building blocks have been put in place early on then as the child grows older they will be able to add more information and understanding at different stages of their development. Children will revisit a death at different points throughout their life. It might be starting a new school, making new friends, noticing the absence of their dad during a football match or missing talking to Mum about relationships. Even the smallest triggers may cause a child to revisit their loss, which may lead to different questions being asked.

At times this may bring up thoughts and feelings that are difficult for the child to understand and unexpected for parents, teachers and anyone caring for a child.

It is now widely accepted that the most helpful way for a child to manage the death of someone important to them is not to forget them, but to find a healthy way to take the person with them into their adult life.

## GRIEVING AS A FAMILY

When someone dies the impact will be felt by each member of the family in a different way. Very young children will experience the death and remember it differently to older children, who may have had many years to relate to the person who died and build up memories. This will mean that each child will be affected in a different way and will grieve differently.

A child who is bereaved at a young age may have brothers and sisters who witnessed or were present at the death, who were included in the funeral when they were not and who have been told a lot more about the circumstances of the death. This may lead to a young child feeling not only confused about what has happened to disrupt their family and cause the absence of a parent, but also excluded from something important that has happened.

As younger children get older it is important to ensure that they are included in conversations about the person who died and are gradually given more information, until they have similar understanding to their older brothers and sisters. The younger children in a family may always feel aggrieved that they did not know the person who died, but if older siblings can be involved in passing on memories, this can be helpful for both sides.

The best way to grieve as a family is to respect that it is different for each person, and that different degrees of emotion are not accurate reflections of how much someone cares. Finding individual ways for children to take part in open conversations, important anniversaries and family events will help everyone to feel valued and included.



# SUPPORT IN PROFESSIONAL SETTINGS

As a childcare professional you have an important role to play in supporting bereaved children in your care.

This chapter is written to offer some advice and guidance to help you feel more confident in talking to a family experiencing the death of a parent. You can also call our National Freephone Helpline for further assistance (08088 020 021) or visit our website [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)

## THINKING ABOUT THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCE

Life for a family after a parent has died can be chaotic, and it is important to think about how a very young child may have experienced the death of a parent and the time afterwards.

It is important not to assume that the child knows either everything or nothing about what has happened. The likelihood is that they have been given some very basic information, and that the child has picked up various bits of information by overhearing conversations and watching what is going on around them.

**'Daddy has died.'**    **'Daddy has gone to heaven.'**  
**'Daddy has gone to sleep.'**    **'Daddy is now a star in the sky.'**

It is also likely that this information will not make complete sense to them, so they may not fully understand what has happened, have the vocabulary to talk about it or ask the right questions. They may also be as upset by the distress of the surviving parent as by the death itself.

The child may have been present at the time of the death or they may have been elsewhere. They may have gone to stay with friends or family immediately after the death, which may have been difficult or great fun. The child may or may not have attended the funeral.

In preparing for the return of a child,

***'the key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home. They should also help families to engage with more specialist support if appropriate.'*** (EYFS 1.10 2017)

In order to do this the key person develops a special relationship with the child and their parents from the outset and is the first point of contact between the childcare setting and home.

It can feel intrusive to start conversations and ask questions, but most parents will understand if questions are phrased in a way which explains that you will be better able to support their child if you can understand how they might be feeling and what they know. What you say to the child will be informed by what you learn from the family.

All of this will help you understand where some of the questions a child might ask come from, and the child's questions will in turn help you understand what further information may be necessary for them to make sense of what has happened.

## WHAT HELPS A CHILD GRIEVE?

Children learn through forming stories about their life. Following a death, young children will create a story or narrative about what has happened, even if it is as basic as:

***'Mummy was very ill. The doctors couldn't make her better and she died.'***

As discussed on pages 14-17, young children need to make sense of what they have been told about a person's death. This can include understanding what dead means, what happened to the body to make it die or what happens to that person after they have died. While these topics can be difficult to explore with a young child, especially as you might not have all the answers, the unknown is often a lot scarier for children. Good communication between staff and the family will be key to helping a child to understand a death.

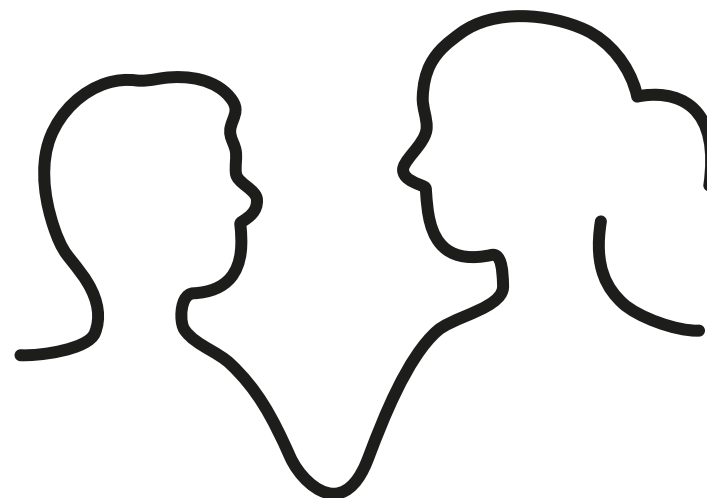
Most young children like to talk about the person who has died, so it is good to welcome spontaneous comments. Even if you did not know the person who died, an open curiosity about them will help these conversations:

***'I never met your daddy; maybe you can tell me what he liked doing?'***

It can be difficult to recognise young children's grief but some possible features are outlined in pages 8-11. Remember, children will jump in and out of their grief, so at times it may appear that they have forgotten that someone has died and can be happy and excited, quickly followed by an event that causes them to be sad. This is all normal.

When trying to support a child after they have returned to a childminder, preschool, nursery or reception class, follow their lead and try not to shut down conversations about the person who died, even if it does take you out of your comfort zone. Equally, providing them with a chance to engage in their usual routines, play and not think about the death can be just as important.

Just like children, parents and carers will respond and cope in different ways following a death. Most parents worry about getting it wrong for their child but initially they may only be able to focus on getting by each day. Usually, with time, parents might feel more able to support their child to express their grief and grieve together as a family. Checking in on how parents are doing and gently supporting them to understand changes in their children can often help them through the rawness and shock of a loss.



## WELCOMING A CHILD BACK

Don't let there be an elephant in the room – something that everyone knows about but nobody talks about.

Before or at the time the child returns, arrange to meet with them and the parent or carer away from other children to give a quiet opportunity for you to acknowledge the death:

***'I'm really sorry to hear that your daddy died; it must be very hard for you all.'***

Let them know that you are aware of what has happened:

***'Mummy said that you went to stay with Granny after Daddy died, and drew a lovely picture for Daddy to have at his funeral.'***

You may want to ask them something that enables them to have an input:

***'What do you remember most from the funeral?'***

or something less specific:

***'What did you and Granny do together?'***

A conversation like this, however short, gives the child the message that you are aware of what has happened, that it doesn't need to be a secret, and that you are comfortable talking about it.

After a bereavement a child may become more clingy to their remaining parent or carer. This may be because they are unsure about what will be happening while they are away. They will also be anxious about whether something bad may happen to them too. Reassurance, alongside a developing understanding of death, can help children to feel more secure. Very young children and babies will rely on routines and transitional objects to help them to feel safe.

## THINKING ABOUT OTHER CHILDREN

You will also be thinking about all the other children in your care and what effect this may have on them.

It may be helpful to acknowledge the child's return at the start of the day and the fact that someone important to them has died. There may be concern around what the bereaved child may say to other children and what difficult conversations this may lead to.

It is not uncommon for a bereaved child to feel entirely comfortable telling other people that the person who died put a rope around their neck and made themselves die, or that they were stabbed with a knife. This can be disconcerting or shocking for staff to hear, and may lead to other children going home and repeating this to their parents. This needs to be handled with sensitivity, but if it is the reality of the child's experience it's important they are not shut down or made to feel it is wrong to speak about it. If it occurs, it may be helpful to acknowledge the death with the children and allow some time for exploring feelings. Play is an important way for young children to process their thinking, so don't be surprised if they act out things to do with death and dying. If the family give consent, it might be helpful to send a letter to other parents giving simple details about the death. This can include information about further sources for help or support if they have any concerns.

Most importantly, remember that bereaved children remain children, who will continue to be full of curiosity and fun as they learn about life, themselves, and their relationship with others. With the help of supportive adults, they will be working towards finding a good place in their lives for the person who died as they grow up.







## LESSON PLAN: DEAD OR ALIVE

The objective of this activity is to help young children to have an increased understanding about what dead and alive means. Taking everyday examples of living and dead things, like flowers and insects, children can see first-hand what the differences are in things that are alive compared to things that are dead. Conversations might focus on the difference in how things look, feel and what they can and cannot do. Supported by a story, this activity allows children to develop a basic understanding of what dead means and start to apply this to their own experiences.

## LESSON PLAN: REMEMBERING

The objective of this activity is to offer children an opportunity to think about how their life has changed, who they now live with and who they remember who has died. This might also be helpful for children who have family members who are still alive, but they no longer have contact with them. With the support of a story and a pre-prepared creative activity, children can be invited to think about family structures and consider what different families look like. Conversations might involve talking about who is missing from the family and who is there to look after them now.

For downloadable lesson plans, please visit [winstonswish.org/ntytg](http://winstonswish.org/ntytg)





## AND WHAT ABOUT YOU?

When preparing for a bereaved child's return to preschool, nursery or reception class do not forget to give some thought to yourself and your colleagues. You too will be impacted by the death, especially if it was sudden or unexpected. Avoiding talking about what has happened or putting off meeting with family members may be your way of protecting yourself from something that feels difficult.

Your relationship with the child and family puts you in a strong position to offer support to understand how a child may be affected by a death, what they need and feel and to offer opportunities to talk about what has happened. You may feel that you do not have the right experience to deal with the situation, or that it needs specialists to talk with families after a bereavement. You may find it helpful to contact a child bereavement charity, like Winston's Wish, to gain some more knowledge and advice (see page 40 for contact details).

Take time to think about how the staff team can work together to support the child, for example having a common understanding of what has happened, how you are going to communicate with the family and what the child may need.

Make time for staff to be able to express their own personal feelings. Do not underestimate the strong connections that childcare providers make with parents and siblings as well as the child in their care. Some may have cared for several children in one family. This may be their first encounter with death, or it may recall personal experiences of loss or death in their own lives. Peer support and supervision can be important at such times. This is not a weakness or unprofessional, but a way in which you can look after yourselves and be well prepared to look after the children who need you.

Do not forget: you do not need to have all the answers.

# CHILDMINDERS AND OTHER FORMS OF HOME-BASED CHILDCARE

All the advice given above for other childcare settings will be helpful for home-based child carers such as childminders and nannies, however there are some important differences to note.

## CHILDMINDERS

The setting for home-based care means that there are usually smaller groups of children. There may be only one childminder or in some settings a small team of minders. Therefore the relationships between staff and families might be better and you may well be on closer personal terms with the parents. You might have followed the story of this death for quite a long time and therefore be dealing with your own emotional reaction to it as well.

The group of children you care for may also know more about the situation and this offers you more immediate opportunities to have discussions about how everyone, but particularly the child affected, is feeling. As always, it is important to be guided by the child and the things that they want to explore. This will need to include a conversation with the parents and carers about how they have described and talked about the death with the child, so you can be led by this.

As a close personal adult for the bereaved child you will be in a good position to support them and their parents at this difficult time. Your home is another safe place for that child, but one which is not directly affected by the loss and which carries on as normal, with the usual rules, routines and activities. This means that the child (and to some extent the parent as well) can get away from the distress which may be invading their own home while still having someone to listen to them with continuity of routines.

## NANNIES

As a nanny, your relationship with the family is likely to be different. You may be a live-in or live-out nanny. You may have a very traditional employer-employee relationship or you may be seen as an extended member of the family.

Your position is unique in that you will be working within the family home. You may have been employed by the family for a long time or a short time. But your presence in the home hopefully means that you have a very good, and potentially a closer and more personal relationship with the family.

In the case of a life-limiting illness, you will have had daily updates and contacts and have been supporting the child and parents from day one. The expected, or unexpected, loss of your employer is likely to have a huge impact on you both personally and professionally.

You may find previous chapters in this book more relevant to you than perhaps to professionals in a day care setting. But the message is just the same. Be open and honest with the family, ensure that the family communicate clearly on what they wish the child to know, understand and take part in. You may need to discuss with the family the role that they wish you to take at the funeral if the child is attending. If they are not attending, and you wish to, discuss the possibility of alternative care for the child.

Whatever your role as a childcare professional, do ensure that you look after yourself so that you can manage your own emotions while supporting those of the child and family.





## WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT YOUNG CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING?

It is important to remember that death is part of life and despite the shock and distress that it causes, most families are able to support each other and find a way to live with their grief. There are some situations which will make it harder to get the right sort of support for children and their families and research has explored the impact that unsupported grief can have on a child's life.

Research has shown that there are noted associations between childhood bereavement and some difficulties in later life. However it is important to know that most children are able to adjust and cope well with death when given age appropriate information.

We also know that when well supported children can gain knowledge and understanding that help build resilience and equip them with useful life skills.



# WE ARE HERE TO HELP...

## FREEPHONE NATIONAL HELPLINE

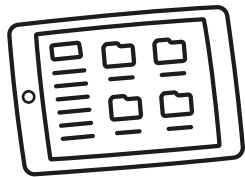
Parents, carers and professionals can call our National Helpline for free on **08088 020 021** for ongoing support and advice, Monday – Friday, 9am – 5.30pm.

*Please visit the website for current opening hours.*



## ONLINE

For parents and professionals, visit **winstonswish.org**  
For young people, visit **talkgrief.org**



## TRAINING

Professionals can access our training to give them the tools needed to support bereaved children and families.  
Visit **winstonswish.org/training**



## PUBLICATIONS & RESOURCES

We have a range of publications and resources aimed at helping bereaved children come to terms with their grief.  
Visit **shop.winstonswish.org**



# WHERE TO SEEK FURTHER SUPPORT

## Childhood Bereavement Network

Provides a directory of organisations around the country that can offer local bereavement services to families and young people. Also offers publications, information and training.

Phone: **020 7843 6309**

Email: **cbn@ncb.org.uk**

**www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk**

## Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY)

PACEY is a membership organisation for childminders and other individual child carers also produces guides to supporting children through bereavement and trauma more generally.

Phone: **0300 003 0005**

Email: **info@pacey.org.uk**

**www.pacey.org.uk**

## Pre-school Learning Alliance

The Pre-school Learning Alliance a membership organisation for childcare providers, offering advice and support for people working with young children.

Phone: **020 7697 2500**

Email: **info@pre-school.org.uk**

**www.pre-school.org.uk**

## National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)

A national charity which aims to share good practice and ideas with childcare providers to make sure that children get the best possible start in life.

Phone: **01484 40 70 70**

**www.ndna.org.uk**

# BOOKS AND RESOURCES

## MISSING MUMMY

*By Rebecca Cobb*

A book that deals with the loss of a parent from a child's point of view and exploring the many emotions a bereaved child may experience, from anger to guilt and from sadness to bewilderment. The book also focuses on the positive – the recognition that the child is still part of a family, and that his memories of his mother are to be treasured.

## WHEN DINOSAURS DIE: A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING DEATH

*By Laurie Krasny Brown and Mark Brown*

This factual picture book uses cartoon dinosaurs to illustrate the text and comment on what is said. It is a bright and colourful book that explains death in a simple and unthreatening way. It covers many issues including 'why does someone die?', 'feelings about death' and 'saying goodbye'.

## IS DADDY COMING BACK IN A MINUTE?

*By Elke Barber and Alex Barber*

Written in Alex's own words, it is based on the real-life conversations that Elke Barber had with her then three-year-old son, Alex, after the sudden death of his father. The book provides reassurance and understanding to readers through clear and honest answers to the difficult questions that can follow the death of a loved one.

## ALWAYS AND FOREVER

*By Alan Durant. Illustrated by Debi Glori*

Otter, Mole and Hare miss Fox when he falls ill and dies. They stay at home and don't want to talk about him because it makes them sadder. Then Squirrel visits and reminds them of all the fun times they had together. They all find a way to remember Fox and get on with their lives. Colourful, detailed pictures in this book emphasise the importance of holding on to memories.

## I MISS YOU: A FIRST LOOK AT DEATH

*By Pat Thomas. Illustrated by Lesley Harker*

This bright and colourful picture book very simply talks about life and death. It briefly covers a range of issues such as why people die, how you may feel when someone dies and what happens afterwards. It includes questions for the reader to answer about their own experiences and a section at the back for adults on how to best use the book. An excellent educational book that could be used as a starting point for discussion.

## GOODBYE MOUSEIE

*By Robie H. Harris. Illustrated by Jan Ormerod*

This beautifully illustrated picture book tells the story of a little boy who's told that his pet mouse has died. At first he doesn't believe it, thinking it's just asleep, but by asking lots of questions and with the help of his family he begins to accept Mousie's death. This is a great story and would be very helpful to introduce death to young children and a starting point to discuss what happens after someone dies and the different feelings a child may have.

## SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF LOSS AND SEPARATION

*By Mary Barna - Pre-school Learning Alliance*

Early years practitioners draw upon a wealth of skills and knowledge in their day-to-day work with young children and families. Some situations are however less easy to respond to, none more so than supporting children who have suffered a loss or bereavement and may be grieving. This book offers an insight into loss, how young children react to the range of loss that they may experience, how to offer appropriate support and also how children grieve.

## MEMORY BOX

*Winston's Wish*

Children need help to build and hold on to positive memories. It is a good idea to collect and keep special things connected with the person who has died in a safe box, like this memory box. The items collected can be used to prompt memories and meaningful stories that will mean a lot to the child in the future. Available in different designs.

A full list of story books and resources can be found at [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)



This book is designed to be a helpful tool for any adult who is supporting a very young child through bereavement. It covers a range of issues that may affect a child when their parent dies. Practical suggestions, ideas for activities and suggested reading are all offered alongside where to find support.

*"I love the step-by-step style this book is set out in. This book would have been incredibly helpful and informative at the time Simon died. The information regarding how to speak to your children and explain about death and burial is fab. It would have helped me to think about things and decide what was best for me and the children."*

Ali (mum to children aged 4 ½ and 10)

## WE CANNOT SUPPORT BEREAVED CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES WITHOUT YOUR SUPPORT.

### BY TEXT:

Text **WISH11£(amount)** to **70070**

### BY PHONE:

To make a donation by phone using your card please call our fundraising team on **01242 515 157**.

### BY POST:

Please download our donation form from our website and send alongside a cheque to the address below. Cheques made payable to 'Winston's Wish'. Kindly post to:

**31-33 Worcester Street, Gloucester, GL1 3AJ**



**Helpline: 08088 020 021 [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)**

31-33 Worcester Street, Gloucester, GL1 3AJ | Tel: 01242 515 157

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