SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH BEREAVEMENT
advice and guidance for parent/carers supporting children with grief

Do I need to tell my child about a death in the family?

As adults we are naturally inclined to protect and shield children from difficult and sad situations. We understandably find it very hard to see a child upset, however, death is the one thing that we cannot change for children. By giving children the facts about the death, we are helping them understand what has happened and supporting them with any changes this may bring about, which is best for the whole family.

Sharing the news of a death needs to be done sensitively and honestly. Provide all of the relevant details to the level of your child's understanding and using their preferred mode(s) of communication.

Worries adults might have

You may be worried about talking to a child about someone close to them who has died. You may worry that you will frighten them or say the wrong thing. You may be struggling with your own feelings, and find it difficult to support the child. Or, you might feel like you want to protect them by not telling them.

Try to be kind to yourself if you do feel this way – it is normal to find conversations like these difficult.

Help

When you're helping a bereaved child, take things one day at a time. If at any time you feel unable to cope remember you don't have to go it alone. Friends, family, healthcare professionals, school are all there to support you.

Here are some tips that may help you talk about death:

When your child asks a question, you could start by asking: "What do you think?" Then you can build your answer on their understanding of what's happened.

Try to avoid telling your child not to worry or be sad. It's normal that they should get attached to people. And, like adults, they might find it hard to control their feelings. You might find that the child doesn't seem to be sad. Sometimes they need time to absorb what's happened.

Don't try to hide your pain, either – it's alright to cry in front of the child. It can help to let them know why you're crying. You might want to say to them that people cry for many reasons, and sometimes they cry to express their pain or sadness when someone close to them dies. Let them know that it's also OK not to cry, if that's how they feel.

Be sure to give your child plenty of reassurance. Let them know they're loved and that there are still people who will be there for them. A cuddle can make a big difference and make them feel cared for.

Be honest - Children need to know what happened to the person that died. Try to explain in clear, simple language that's right for their age and level of experience. You might also try giving them information in small amounts at a time, especially to young children, as this can help them understand. Once you've explained that someone has died, the details can follow.

Use plain language - It is clearer to say someone has died than to use euphemisms. Avoid explanations such as the person has 'gone to sleep' or 'gone away'. They may make the child frightened to go to sleep or worry when you leave the house you might not come back.

Encourage questions - Be prepared for a child to be curious and to ask the same questions again and again. This can be distressing but remember it's a part of their need for reassurance and helps them process the information.

Reassure them - It's common for children to feel that the person has died as a result of something they may have said or

Support services

- **Child Bereavement UK supports families** and educates professionals when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement. Support Line: 0800 02 888 40
- **Counselling Directory** have developed a service that brings together all of the information needed to help connect people with the right counsellor or professional support for them.
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** exists to promote the well-being of bereaved people and to enable anyone bereaved by death to understand their grief and cope with their loss. Helpline: 0844 477 9400
- **Self Help** is about finding resources that might alleviate stress and worry. These resources are an addition to professional's support around mental health. The link has supportive resources for adults and children. https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/

Recommended books on Bereavement for Children. Book from Amazon

1. **Love Will Never Die Author: Clare Shaw**
   Using clear but child-friendly language, large colourful illustrations, this rhyming book addresses the mixed feelings a bereaved child might go through. It offers support and understanding alongside interactive areas where the child can express themselves through writing and drawing.

2. **Waterbugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young children. Author: Doris Stickney**

Written from a Christian perspective, this acclaimed book can be used to help explain the concept of death to young children. The story illustrates that death is inevitable, irreversible but natural.

3. **Badger's Parting Gifts. Author: Susan Varley**
   Badger is so old that he knows he will soon die. He tries to prepare his friends for this event, but when he does die, they are still grief-stricken. Gradually they come to terms with their grief by remembering all the practical things Badger taught them, and so Badger lives on in his friends' memories of him.

   The new, 35th anniversary edition of the book features a reading guide from Child Bereavement UK that provides tips for reading Badger's Parting Gifts with children and helping them better understand grief.

   Download our online information sheet Talking With and Supporting Bereaved Children with further notes and guidance, using examples and illustrations from the book.

4. **Always and Forever. Author: Alan Durant**
   When Fox dies the rest of his 'family' are absolutely distraught. How will Mole, Otter and Hare go on without their beloved friend? But, months later, Squirrel reminds them all of how funny Fox used to be, and they realise that Fox is still there in their hearts and memories.

5. **Saying Goodbye to Hare. Author: Carol Lee**
   This is an uplifting story written for children aged 5-9 years about death and dying. As young Rabbit witnesses the life, illness and death of his dear friend Hare, the story explores some of the emotional and physical feelings, and some of the questions children have at this time. The story is sensitively written to give a positive, thoughtful message about death and dying. It also includes guidance notes for adults supporting a bereaved child.

6. **Benny's Hat. Author: Juliet Clare Bell**
   Benny's Hat deals quietly with the huge subject of a sibling dying, from the viewpoint of the sister. It shows how children and young people might deal with serious illness and death differently to adults. The story gives adult readers examples of how to support children when a sibling is not expected to live, not only from the section for parents at the back, but also by watching Friz's parents' reactions to her behaviour.

7. **Ben's Flying Flowers. Author: Inger Maier**
   When Emily loses her brother after a long illness, she feels alone, angry, and very, very sad. with the understanding and support of her parents, Emily learns that it helps when she snuggles with her parents. It helps when she talks about her feelings and asks questions about Ben. And it helps when she does regular kid stuff too. But mostly, she learns that remembering Ben and their happy life together builds health and helpful images that soother her sad feelings and provide much comfort to her and her family. Written for children aged 4-8.

8. **Stewart's Tree. Author: Cathy Campbell**
   Ellen's new baby brother Stewart has been "lost". Ellen looks in all the cupboards for Stewart, and even in the washing machine – but then her family her understand that Stewart has died and isn't going to come back. Together They plant a tree for Stewart, so they will always have a place to remember him. This book for children aged 3+ helps explain sibling loss shortly after birth, and provides guidance for adults written by qualified clinicians.