

Bereavement

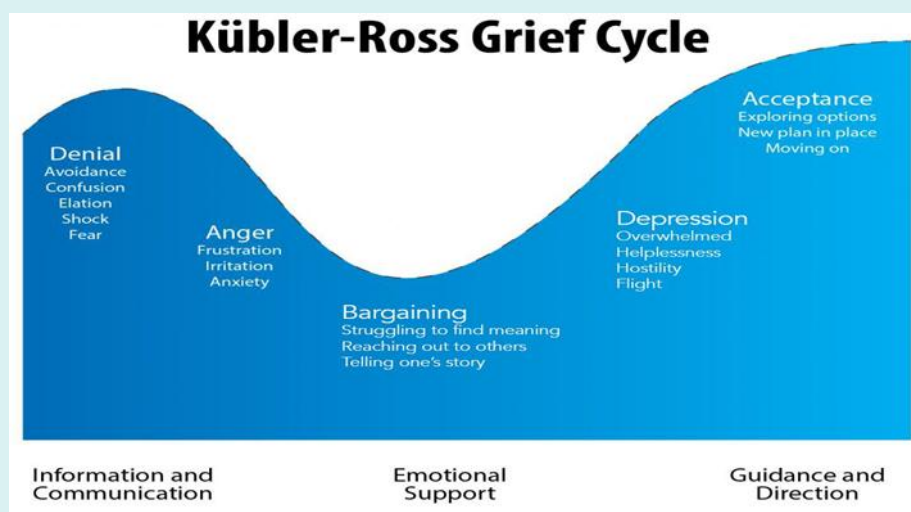
Overview description

The term 'bereavement' refers to the process of grieving and mourning and is associated with a deep sense of loss and sadness. It is a natural process; however, its effects can be overwhelming. Many children and young people will experience bereavement during their school years, through the loss of a parent, sibling, grandparent or friend. Children can also face the loss of a loved animal or pet which can be as significant for them as losing a relative or friend.

During bereavement, children and young people can often experience a wide range of emotions, including sadness, guilt, anxiety, anger, fear, disbelief, confusion and denial. With the right support put in place, most children and young people can learn to manage these unpleasant feelings. Schools/colleges are well situated to provide such support and can do a huge amount to support children experiencing grief.

Processes of grief:

It has been suggested that grief includes five stages, of **denial, anger, bargaining, depression** and **finally acceptance** (Kübler-Ross, 1969). It is believed that individuals experience each stage of this cycle when grieving, but not always progressively. Another common model for grief is the Dual Process Model (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). In this model, individuals oscillate between loss and restoration//coping activities, eventually finding ways to experience a meaningful life. Everybody experiences grief in their own way and they may present differently on a day to day basis. It can be difficult to determine how a child may be grieving, but this cycle and its descriptors, can be used as a guide for practitioners to understand what a young person may be experiencing, and therefore, provide appropriate support and know what to look out for.



The different ways children and young people express loss

Physical reactions:

Headaches/ Migraines

Tiredness /
Insomnia

Stomach-ache,
nausea/sickness

Nightmares

Emotional reactions:

Sadness/upset

Anger

Withdrawal (difficulty in
socialising and playing)

School refusal

Psychological reactions:

Changes of personality
and behaviour (e.g.
from extrovert to
introvert)

Clinginess/
insecurity

Fears/anxieties

Inability to
concentrate

How do children and young people grieve?

Many children and young people have a limited ability and vocabulary to describe how they are feeling; however, their feelings are often communicated through their behaviour. Due to the complex and varied nature of young people, loss can affect individuals very differently – even children within the same family. Although, an individual's developmental age has a direct effect on their level of understanding and will impact how they respond to grief. Their response will also be influenced by support and behaviour of those adults around them. Children, more than adults, swing quickly between grieving and getting on with their normal lives. They can be upset one minute and asking to play football or have some ice cream the next. It can be so quick that it's sometimes called 'puddle jumping' – the puddle is their feelings of grief, and they move quickly in and out of the puddle.

The importance of acknowledgement

"It's one thing to lose something that was important to you, but it is far worse when no one in your universe recognises that you lost it." - *Kenneth Hardy*

How death is understood at different ages and stages of development

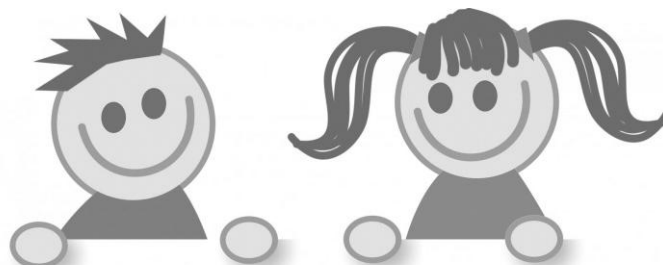
Preschool children (Aged 2-5 years old)

Little understanding of death and its permanence

Understanding: At this age children have little concept of permanence and therefore may not understand that the person is not coming back. Children believe that death is reversible and are also vulnerable to believing that the person died because of something they said or did since they are egocentric. At this stage of development, abstract concepts are not easily grasped and it is important for the child to be spoken to in concrete terms. Children of this age may repeatedly ask the same questions in order to make sense of what has happened.

Key points

- Are curious about death and believe death is temporary or reversible.
- May see death as something like sleeping—the person is dead but only in a limited way and may continue to breathe or eat after death.
- Are characterized by 'magical thinking' and understand the world as a mix of reality and fantasy.
- Are naturally egocentric and see themselves as the cause of events around them
- Often feel guilty and believe that they are responsible for the death of a loved one, perhaps because they were 'bad' or wished the person would 'go away'.
- May think that they can make the deceased come back if they are good enough.
- Will worry about who will take care of them and about being abandoned
- Are still greatly affected by the sadness of surviving family members.
- Cannot put their feelings into words and instead react to loss through behaviours such as irritability, aggression, physical symptoms, difficulty sleeping, or regression (such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking) Is this regression at that age?



What can staff do:

- They need reassurance that life will continue the same i.e. Routines, life patterns and activities need to be emphasised in order to provide reassurance to the child that 'life goes on'.
- Keep the memories alive: Work alongside the family and encourage them to tell stories and use concrete things where possible i.e. memory box, photos, personalised stories.
- It is vital to reinforce the child's feelings of safety and security at this stage of development.
- Be honest with the child when you answer their questions. They may ask things like 'where have they gone?' and 'what does death mean?' which can be hard to answer.
- Young children need enough information to answer their questions, enough detail in line with their developmental stage and to revisit and update this information as they mature.

Possible scripts include: "Your daddy has died, which means he cannot come back, but you can keep asking me as I know how hard it is to believe that" or "when they die their body stops working, they cannot walk, talk, see or breathe or do anything our bodies do."

Primary Aged Children (6-12 years)

Greater understanding of death and beginning to understand that death is permanent

Understanding: Children begin to understand that death is irreversible and something that eventually happens to all living things. Children above 5 may grasp that death happens but may never have experienced bereavement. Younger children (5-7yrs) may demonstrate 'somatic' complaints which are manifestations of emotional pain i.e. headaches, sore tummy. Behaviour may change, so it is important to encourage children to express how they are feeling and for them to understand what they are feeling is perfectly normal. Older children (7-11yrs) will understand that death has happened and may seek more answers around death and what it means.

Key points:

- Understand that death is final, but see it as something that happens only to other people.
- May think of death as a person or a spirit, like a ghost, angel, or a skeleton.
- Understand that death is universal, unavoidable, and will happen to them (by age 10).
- Are often interested in the specific details of death and what happens to the body after death.
- May experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness, and worry about their own death.
- Continue to have difficulty expressing their feelings and may react through behaviours such as school phobia, poor performance in school, aggression, physical symptoms, withdrawal from friends, and regression.
- Still worry about who will take care of them and will likely experience insecurity, clinginess, and fear of abandonment.

What can staff do?

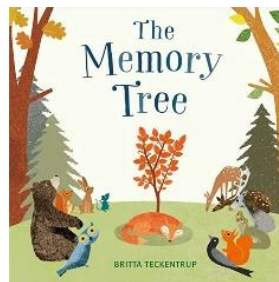
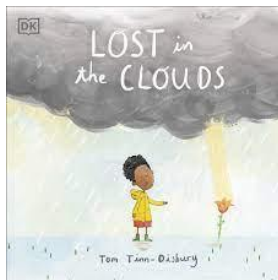
All strategies stated above are also relevant for this age group

Children begin to recognise that the loss makes them different from their peers. They can feel social isolation when their loved one can't attend events like parents evening, school plays and sports day. It is important for them to identify with other peers and make strong friendships.

- Provide children the opportunity to identify and build friendships with other young people who have suffered bereavement.
- Talk to the children about how they are feeling and recognise that it may be difficult on important events when their loved one cannot be there.
- Provide opportunities on special occasions to create cards, letters or presents for their loved one e.g. Mother's or Father's Day, their birthday etc.
- Additionally, encourage them to read books about loss, watch tv programmes, read and write on websites about their losses and associate with similar losses.

Resources to support early years children with bereavement include:

- <https://www.annafreud.org/resources/under-fives-wellbeing/common-difficulties/bereavement/>
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/early-years>



Secondary and Post-16 Aged Children

Understanding: Young people or teenagers have developed a greater understanding of death, the long-term implications of losing someone close and are more keenly aware of the emotional aspects than younger children. Due to the developmental changes taking place within the young person at this time their reactions to death are likely to be extremely intense. Young people are developing their own ideas about who they are and what is important to them in their lives. They are more aware of their future. Death may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings. As adults our job is to let them know that we are there if they need to talk, or that we can find someone else to help if necessary. The young person's tasks of grieving are very similar to that of an adult but the young mourner is often unable to manage the strong emotions that bereavement entails and can therefore present as being extremely angry and even end up in physical fights. Some bereaved young people can revert to childish behaviour in order to relocate some security and normality in their lives whereas others might try to "grow up too fast" and see themselves as taking on adult roles.

Secondary and Post-16 Students: Key Points

- Have an adult understanding of the concept of death, but do not have the experiences, coping skills, or behaviour of an adult.
- May 'act out' in anger or show impulsive or reckless behaviours, such as substance misuse or fighting in school/college.
- May experience a wide range of emotions, but not know how to handle them or feel comfortable expressing them.
- The reality of death contradicts a teenager's view of himself or herself as invincible, and teenagers may question their faith or their understanding of the world.
- Developmental issues of independence and separation from parents can interfere with the ability to receive support from adult family members.
- Coping strategies may create tension with family members, as adolescents may cope by spending more time with friends or by withdrawing from the family to be alone.

Death by Suicide

Suicide is a particularly challenging area of bereavement and it can often be very difficult to talk about what has happened. However, children are better able to deal with the difficult event, if they are given open and honest information. Telling a child or young person about a sudden and unexplained death is not likely to be a standalone conversation, but rather a lengthy process that may happen in stages over days, weeks, months and years after the death. **Suicide is difficult to explain to a young person and it would be recommended that expert help would be sought in these instances.**

What can education settings do?

- **Routines** provide a sense of **normality** for children and young people. Everything else may be falling apart but school and the teachers can provide a sense of security and continuity.
- Settings can give students **a relief from grief** and the emotionally charged atmosphere at home.
- Settings can offer **a safe space** for them to **express their grief**. Often they can try and spare their family by hiding their own grief at home.
- Settings can provide opportunities for children and young people to be **listened to** and **talk about their grief**. Some family members can struggle to deal with their own grief, making it difficult to make time for the child's grief.
- Settings allows children to **still be a child**, through playing, laughing and singing without feeling guilty. Should this be explicitly talked about- acknowledging that the child may feel guilty but then rationalising with them?
- Settings can provide **general support** for the children and young people and their families. Settings can maintain **good communication** with home to keep track of how a child or young person is coping at both home and school.
- Settings can offer **intervention** and **resources** on bereavement. Using stories, novels and poems can allow children and young people to learn the concept of death and learn through reading, listening and discussion.

Other considerations:

We must be mindful of each family's beliefs, values, history and current context.

1. Have contact with home

Having good communication with the family will enable school/college to understand what the pupil has been told and provide support for those caring for the pupil. It is important to share the pupil's successes as well as any concerns you may have.

2. Provide young people with information

Provide children and young people with clear, honest and age-appropriate information. They need enough information to answer their questions, enough detail in line with their developmental stage and they need to revisit and update this information as they mature.

3. Ask the young people what will help

Ask a bereaved pupil to think about what they need and want from their friends, teachers and adults in school/college. This will offer them an element of control and give clarity to those wanting to help. Bereaved young people tell us that they welcome the flexibility to leave a lesson if they unexpectedly become overwhelmed by their feelings of grief, as long as this is not viewed as 'poor behaviour' by members of staff.

4. Build support networks

Bereaved pupils may feel very different to their peers and can benefit from opportunities to meet other bereaved young people. They may want to access to further information about bereavement, so you could signpost them to websites and apps.

5. Offer simple choices

A bereaved young person can feel overwhelmed and out of control. By offering simple choices, a setting can help a pupil to feel in control of at least one aspect of their life, particularly in relation to how they manage their grief in school/college.

6. Boost self esteem

Bereaved young people can experience feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-esteem. It is beneficial to provide opportunities to build on their self-esteem and highlight positive attributes a young person has.

7. Support changes

A bereaved pupil can find the transition between primary school and secondary school particularly difficult. Routines become important to them and they may react to a change in school environment. Young people may feel reluctant to be away from their family members or significant people, particularly on school trips or overnight stays.

Try to prepare them in advance for any changes, where possible, and address any anxieties they may have

Younger children:

Help them to make sense of the death and managing their grief

1. Help them to understand the story of what happened
2. Feel the feelings
3. Adjust to life without the person who died
4. Hold onto their memories

Can you add a box for 'Understand the story?'

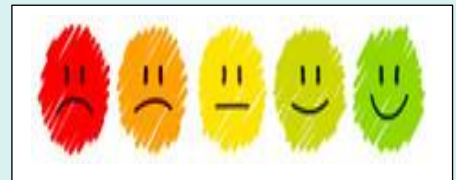
Feel the feelings

What are my feelings? (is sad a big enough word?)

Where do I feel them? (and when?)

How big are they?

Who can I tell? How can I express them?

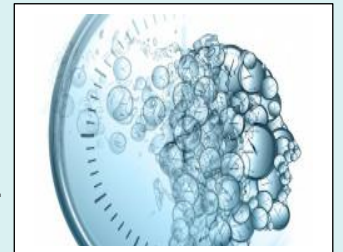


Adjust to life without the person who died

Look for opportunities to help the child feel safe

Keep routines

Give support where further changes will be happening and be patient.



Keeping memories alive-Use same wording as above

Work alongside families and encourage them to tell stories

Use concrete things; memory boxes, photos and personalised stories

Encourage families to look for opportunities to mention

'that was mum's favourite too'



Creative ideas for capturing memories

- **Memory bracelet** - Make a 'friendship bracelet' by plaiting together coloured threads. Each thread could represent a different memory or special quality of the person who has died.
- **Pom-pom** - create a small pom-pom using different colour/texture wool, again representing different memories. This pom-pom can also act as a small fidget toy as well as a reminder of the person who died.
- **Weaving** - weaving different threads representing different memories to create a small wall-hanging piece of art. Offering a selection of items to incorporate into the design can add to the detail and give individual meaning to the final piece.
- **Dream-catcher** - create one of these colourful pieces in memory of a person who has died. The belief is that all sorts of dreams get caught in the web of the dream catcher but only the good ones can pass through and slide down the feathers to the sleeper below. Bad dreams become tangled in the protective net and are held until morning, when they burn up in the sunlight. The basis for a dream catcher can be as simple as a thin twig or flexible wire which can be shaped into a circle, or cut out the rim of a paper plate. Wool or twine is traditionally knotted in an intricate pattern but can be simply wound around the frame to create the 'web'.
- **Worry dolls** - According to legend, children in Guatemala tell their worries and fears to the Worry Dolls and place them under their pillow when they go to sleep at night. The doll 'looks after' the worry or problem during the night, so the child can sleep peacefully. Dolls can be made by simply wrapping coloured wool around lolly sticks, pipe cleaners or sticks. As an alternative, small pom-pom pets or tassel dolls can be created with wool or fine thread or even cut out of paper and coloured in.
- **A memory comfort object** - Sewing something special to the inside of a piece of clothing or into a pocket can be a discreet reminder for a bereaved pupil. This could be a button, small swatch of fabric or piece of ribbon from clothing owned by the person who died, or it could be one of these items chosen by the bereaved pupil to represent a special memory.

Ideas taken from Child bereavement UK 2020

Supporting Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

When supporting children with SEN with bereavement you need to think about the developmental and cognitive age of the child, particularly in terms of what they will be able to understand and comprehend. You also have to take into consideration their receptive and expressive communication age. Refer to the developmental stages above to support them at their functioning level. Other factors that will influence their understanding of death include previous life experiences and the family's culture and beliefs, specifically in relation to death.

When supporting children with SEND, we may not know exactly what a child or a young person with profound and multiple learning disabilities understands when someone significant dies. However, they will certainly be aware of that person's absence and of the changes in their own life that may result.

Communicating

It is important to acknowledge the death. If the young person can access words, use real words like 'dying' and 'dead' and not euphemisms. If the child communicates using signs or symbols, ensure you have the correct vocabulary to hand. Make use of all relevant modes of communication, including signing, symbols and photos.

Helping them to understand death

Children with difficulties may find it particularly difficult to grasp the concept of death and its permanence. They will benefit from simple and real-life examples to illustrate the difference between death and living things. Particularly, children with ASD would benefit from visual explanations of the life cycle.



Buy a bunch of flowers, put them in a vase and observe them wilt, wither, and die. Compare them to a fresh bunch of the same type. If kept, the dead flowers will illustrate that death is permanent and that the flowers do not return to life.

Take the opportunity to talk about insects or animals that have died – for example a fly or a spider in the classroom. Use story books to help explain.



Take photographs of the above activities and put these into a book. This will act as a visual reminder for the many times when the explanation will need to be repeated.

Remembering Activities

Spraying the perfume or the aftershave of the person who has died

Use photographs and memories of significant events to create timeline and story of that person's life.

Put together a memory box of tangible reminders. Try to include something related to all 5 senses. E.g photograph, CD, perfume, object, fabric from their clothes etc.

To download SEND bereavement resources, visit here:

<https://www.winstonswish.org/we-all-grieve-activity-pack>

Thinking about the impact of perinatal loss in the family

Still Birth

Miscarriage

Baby removed due to care proceedings

The difference with a perinatal loss is that it is invisible and is a loss of hope. The impact of this loss is massive and should be taken with great sensitivity. It can impact various people and relationships.

Impact on the mother's mind and body

Impact on the father

Impact on the couple's relationship

Impact on the next pregnancy

Impact on a sibling

Impact on grandparents

Wider Family

Friends

Perinatal loss and the grief accompanied with that loss, can often lead to the mother:

- Feeling responsible
- Having feelings of guilt and shame
- Questioning whether it was a result of anything they have done
- Feeling that their body may have failed them

With all this in mind, one can imagine how difficult it must be for this parent to have mental space for the sibling and they may feel overwhelmed. Parents may want to protect the child from their pain and they may find it extremely difficult to talk about.

If children don't know what is going on or they feel that something is not quite right they may fill the gaps in with their fantasies. Additionally, you may see changes to their behaviour. Please refer to the physical, emotional and psychological changes shared earlier on in this chapter, for more information on what behaviours you may observe.

They may become:

- Withdrawn
- Clingy
- Aggressive

What to do?

You can use similar strategies to those that have been mentioned throughout this chapter which support any type of bereavement.

Communicate with the bereaved young person's family. Think together how you can best help their child.

- *Don't be afraid of saying the word 'death' or 'died'*

You may want to:

- Suggest that parents can create a book together to explain what has happened
- Help by reading a book that addresses the subject of death
- If the child wants to, they could create a drawing for the baby

For more information:

<https://www.tommys.org/baby-loss-support/stillbirth-information-and-support/supporting-siblings-through-stillbirth>

<https://www.tommys.org/baby-loss-support/neonatal-death-information-and-support/support-siblings-after-death-baby>

Books or Resources for children and young people

Under 5

Someone I know has died by Trish Phillips

Missing Mummy by Rebecca Cobb

5-11 Years

Remembering by Dianne Leutner

Love will never die by Clare Shaw

Young people (11+)

What on earth do you do when someone dies? By Trevor Romaine and Elizabeth Verdick

Still here with me: Teenagers and children losing a parent by Suzanne Sjoqvist

Apart of me – this is an app designed by a child psychologist for young people aged 11 and above who have a parent or relative who's died or is living with a terminal illness.

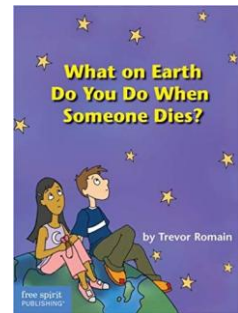
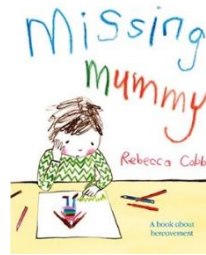
Post-16

It may be helpful to support young people to explore audio-books or podcasts. The Marie Curie Talkabout recommends the following podcasts:

Griefcast - writer and comedian Cariad Lloyd discusses how we deal with grief and she features a guest comedian each week.

#H2MS: Help 2 Make Sense – this is an online tool for Children and young people coming to terms with the death of a loved one. There is a podcast series where young people who've coped with the death of their loved one.

Grief support – this is an app for young people aged 11-25 who've been bereaved. It can also be used by parents, teachers and friends who want to know more about providing support. For young people aged 11-25 who've been bereaved. It can also be used by parents, teachers and friends who want to know more about providing support.



Useful Resources

Greater Manchester Bereavement Service has helpful links for settings.
<https://greater-manchester-bereavement-service.org.uk/useful-info/>

SUPPORTING CHILDREN THAT ARE BEREAVED

SHOW MORE

Resources for parents, carers and teachers to help support children that are bereaved.



Winston's Wish

Advice and guidance on how to support bereaved children during COVID-19.



Time4Me

Time4Me is a free, interactive workbook to be used with bereaved children and an adult. It is designed to facilitate conversations around the death of a significant person in the child's life.



Child Bereavement UK

Support and information for parents, carers, and people that work with children and young people.

RESOURCES FOR SCHOOLS

SHOW MORE

Resources for teachers, teaching assistants, pastoral staff and senior management to help support children that are bereaved.



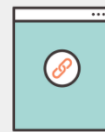
Cruse Bereavement Care

Information for schools on how to support children that are bereaved.



The Guardian

Article about how one school handled bereavement in school.



Winston's Wish

Support for school professionals who are supporting a bereaved pupil.

Supporting Children through Grief & Loss: Practical Ideas and Creative Activities for Schools & Carers: Practical Ideas & Creative Activities for Schools & Carers (Jacobs, 2013)

<http://www.uktraumacouncil.org/>

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/about-cruse/publications/free-booklets>

<https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/bereavement-resources-for-parents-and-school-staff/>

Websites with resources for schools and settings

Samaritans Developing Emotional Awareness & Learning (DEAL) Programme
www.samaritans.org/our_services/work_in_schools/welcome_to_deal.aspx

Child Bereavement Charity lesson plans: [Support for the education sector | Child Bereavement UK](#)

Child Bereavement Charity specific advice and resources for post-18:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/higher-education>

The Place2Be information for schools: www.theplace2be.org.uk/

Cruse Bereavement Care information for schools:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/schools/>

Childhood Bereavement Network:

<https://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/if-you-need-help-around-death/schools>

Other useful links

<https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/mental-health-needs/bereavement-and-grief/>

<https://www.theeducationpeople.org/products/early-years-childcare/small-steps/>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

www.winstonswish.org

One Education EPS have produced a bereavement guidance document for schools which can be downloaded from the website or requested via email.