



Diocese of York – Bereavement Support Materials for Children and Young People, including specific reference to the Coronavirus pandemic

Introduction

'Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve' (Wolfelt, 1996, p. ix)

Today's children and young people have been described as 'the world's first 'grief-free' generation' (Wolfelt, 1996, p. 8). Working with children and young people who are experiencing loss and grief is an enormous privilege and a responsibility. Whilst it is important that we take that responsibility seriously, we must also hold it lightly, accepting that it is not our job to 'cure' the child or the situation, and that there are no hard and fast rules.

What is key is that we allow ourselves to be guided by the child or young person who is grieving, the only expert in how they are feeling. Wolfelt uses the helpful metaphor of gardening – where a natural process of growth and change is protected and nurtured by those who care. He suggests that 'grief gardeners' know that grief is organic, complex but perfectly natural and necessary. As gardeners, we are called to watch and learn as well as to create conditions that allow our companion to mourn.

The process of accompanying a child or young person in their grief journey involves patience, courage and flexibility as they flit nimbly between moments of deep pain, times of fun and laughter, and philosophical depth and pragmatic realism as they explore their assumptions about life and its meaning and purpose.

Types of losses and bereavements

There are all sorts of losses and bereavements some of which are listed below. Some losses are a normal and expected part of life like moving to a new school or the death of an elderly relative, and others are unexpected and shocking.

For many children and young people the Coronavirus Pandemic has caused (and will cause) a number of losses and bereavements. Whatever the loss, there are a number of consequences - examples of which are given below – some of which are not always obviously linked. The magnitude of these will vary from person to person. In particular, be aware of the possibility of cumulative losses.

- **The death of a sibling.** This can be particularly traumatic for children not only because they are watching their parents grieve, but also because sibling relationships are often complex with very strong feelings of both love and ambivalence. Children often express confusion caused by feelings of fear, guilt and relief
- **The death of a parent** can also result in numerous other losses like changes in financial status, house and school moves. These create a cumulative effect that can overwhelm a child or young person



Losses	Consequences	Bereavements
Moving house	Loss of self – part of me died when...	Death of a parent
Changing schools	Loss of identity – what is my role in this new order?	Death of a grandparent
Divorce and family break up	Loss of self-confidence – experience shame and doubt	Death of a sibling
Imprisonment of parent/carer	Loss of health – trauma and stress can produce physical symptoms	Death of another family member
Reduction in mobility (due to lockdown or illness)	Loss of personality – behaviours that are not usual and a sense of not being yourself	Death of a pet
Not able to go to school (due to lockdown or illness)	Loss of emotional security – changes in family or lifestyle and opportunities to share feelings with others	Death of a school friend
Not able to take exams or no opportunity to show achievement (due to lockdown or illness)	Loss of safety – changes in family personnel and lifestyle can reduce protection from abuse or cause others to become abusive	Death of a family friend
Extreme change in world order	Loss of financial security – can cause anxiety about families future or further losses (e.g. holidays and treats)	Death of a school teacher/carer/counsellor/ children's or youth worker/minister
Not able to visit sick relatives or attend funerals of loved ones	Loss of fun – changes in lifestyle or the grief of others mutes the 'fun' in family life	Death of neighbour
	Loss of goals and dreams – hopes for the future can be shattered	Death of a celebrity
	Loss of faith -	Death of a community figure
	Loss of desire to live	



Assumptions to avoid

- *Grief and mourning are the same thing* – sometimes the words grief and mourning are used interchangeably but there is an essential difference. Grief is the internal experience of thoughts and feelings caused by the loss of someone or something. Mourning is the external expression of that grieving. For children and young people mourning is more often expressed through actions than words, and can look very different from the mourning of adults.
- *Grief can be resolved* – we are forever changed by the loss we have experienced. This doesn't mean that we have to remain stunted and damaged by the experience, but attempts to return things to the way they were will only end in frustration and failure to recognise the growth brought about by the process of mourning and lament.
- *You must be strong* – sometimes well-meaning adults seeking to give children and young people purpose in the new order, say things like 'you must be strong for your mother' or 'it's your job to look after your siblings now'. There has been much debate about whether Jesus knew he was going to bring Lazarus back to life, but importantly, the Bible tells us that he wept. He experienced the full weight of grief demonstrating in that moment neither 'strength' or 'usefulness'.
- *You have a right not to hurt* – Because of the wonders of modern medicine children in the Western world are rarely exposed to the denegrating, grinding reality of sickness and disease. Just think for the moment about the message of the Calpol advert. Our society has come to believe that we have a right to eternal youth lived with no pain, so when pain strikes we do everything we can to avoid it. The Bible is full of lament, helping us to recognise that pain and death are part of life, not separate from it.
- *You can get over grief* – no one ever totally completes the mourning process. It is perhaps more helpful to think of grief as a journey with no endpoint. Quite often, another 'cycle' is experienced at key points throughout the child's growth into adulthood, particularly celebratory events and 'firsts'.
- *They are playing so they don't care* – play is the work of the child and the space where they are able to process their thoughts and feelings. If the loss or death is sudden, then quite often a child may take some time to react as they initially protect themselves from the painful reality
- *Children with learning difficulties or with Autistic Spectrum Disorder don't feel grief like others* – Regardless of the cognitive ability or emotional and social intelligence of a child, they still are able to love and experience grief. For many their reaction to minor losses brought about by change is evidence of how deeply they feel. Many children and young people with additional needs develop very strong emotional attachments to significant people in their lives, it is therefore essential to keep them as informed as possible even if this requires a lot of repetition and patience as they process the feelings and emotions in their own way
- *Our way of mourning is normal* – beliefs, values and practices surrounding death vary in different cultures. Don't assume that we know what is best or most appropriate for others in their mourning
- *Children are too young to attend funerals* – Children and young people have the same right and privilege to attend funerals as adults as they help survivors to acknowledge the death and provide structure and process for mourning.



Basic Principles to practice

- The child is the expert but might not know it. Be patient. Too many questions might actually stop the child expressing what is really going on for them.
- Watch for non-verbal clues (facial expressions, body language, repeated themes in play or conversation) to what the child is experiencing and invitations to engage with that.
- Take time to understand the relationship the child had with the person who has died – do not assume that kinship determine the size of the grief. Consider what level of attachment there was, and what function the relationship serves for the child, as well as whether there is evidence of ambivalence. The age of the person who died is also going to have an impact on how the child perceives the 'natural order' of the loss.
- Many Christians hold a strong hope in heaven, but we must be careful not to make heaven seem so attractive that the child would prefer to be there, particularly if they are grieving a parent.
- Keep the child informed of the progress towards loss or death. Whilst we might think we are protecting them from pain, a sudden loss or death can be harder for the child to cope with, and the knowledge that other people knew and didn't tell them can lead to feelings of betrayal.
- Use concrete terms like gone, death and dead rather than 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep' which imply impermanence. If you are supporting a child whose relative has died, agree with them what terms they would like to use, as this gives them some autonomy.
- Don't rush a child or young person to 'get over it'. It is quite common to see an increase in signs of mourning six months after the initial event, particularly if the child has 'protected themselves', as they realise that the death or loss is permanent.
- Talk 'with', not 'at' the child or young person allowing them to set the agenda in terms of whether they want to talk about the death/loss or not.
- If a child or young person is exhibiting 'physical symptoms' to their grief and loss (see below), tend to them. Do not punish or shame them their physical hurts are communicating their emotions.
- If the response to grief is regression, give the child or young person space to utilise behaviours that allow them to feel safe and secure, trying to understand the underlying need that they are meeting, and providing a trusting and supporting presence. Sometimes other family members might be using the child's regression to meet their own needs (for instance a parent grieving the loss of a young sibling, might become reliant on a 'substitute baby') so give space for balance and opportunities for age appropriate balance
- Give permission for anger – expressing the painful reality of loss is healthy. It doesn't mean there is something wrong with them or us. Don't shut down robust expressions of frustration and anger at God either; he is big enough to handle it!



Some common grief responses¹

Children's grief can manifest itself in a number of ways, but is often felt in the body with physiological responses like: tiredness and apathy, disrupted sleep patterns, change in appetite, stomach pain and headaches. Sometimes children can react with shock-like symptoms including shortness of breath and trembling or develop skin rashes and muscle weakness.

Age	Typical grief response	Support tips
Infants and toddlers under two (Loss may be understood as an absence, particularly of a primary caregiver)	'I'm upset' behaviours (e.g. crying, increased self-soothing, biting)	Offer physical comfort
	Changes in normal sleeping and eating patterns	Accept the changes while still trying to keep to some kind of routine, as routine and structure are a comfort for this age
Pre-schoolers (Ages 3-6) Death may be thought of as temporary and/or reversible	May not understand their new, scary feelings and may not be able to verbalise them.	Provide them with the vocabulary for their feelings: grief, sadness, numb, angry
	May ask repeated questions about the loss or death, and may act out related scenarios in play	Be honest, and answer with concrete words, not abstract half-truths. Death play is normal and helps children integrate the reality of death. Join in with the play when invited
	May regress: be clingy, increase self-soothing like thumb sucking, lose potty training, and revert to baby talk	Short-term regressive behavior is normal. Don't get cross, accept and offer physical comfort when needed
Primary Age (6-11) A clearer understanding of death develops. Older children in this age group may have an 'adult' understanding of what death is	Express their grief primarily through play	Use play therapy techniques
	May become socially shy, and fall behind in school	Children need permission to concentrate on mourning before they can be expected to forge ahead with the rest of their lives. Give them time
	May become disruptive and aggressive because they don't know how to handle their grief feelings	Remember anger is a secondary emotion and give the child alternative ways of venting their anger so that they can recognize the pain or sadness they are really feeling. Support groups can be really helpful
Adolescents and teenagers (11+) Understand death cognitively, but are only beginning to grapple with it spiritually	May protest the loss by becoming disruptive and aggressive, and/or by withdrawing	Try to tolerate behaviours as long as there is no risk of harm to the young person or others. Short term withdrawal is normal, but if it extends this is an indication that the young person might need extra help
	May feel that life has been unfair and develop an angry persecution complex	The normal teenage egocentricism can mean that the focus is exclusively on the impact this loss or death has had on them. Give them time to explore this fully before gently encouraging them to consider the impact on others
	May act out a search for meaning and testing their own mortality through risky behaviours	Give plenty of opportunities for the young person to ask the 'why' questions about life and death, without pretending you have all the answers

¹ Adapted from (Wolfelt, 1996, pp. 34-35)



Collective worship and memorials for use at home, church or school

One of the difficult outcomes of the measures to reduce the spread of Coronavirus is the restrictions around funerals. It is really important that family members (and in particular children and young people) who are unable to attend, are given the opportunity to mark the loss and bereavement with a ritual.

Below are some ideas that could be used when the school or church community is gathered or at home to help children and young people acknowledge the death or the loss they experienced and mourn.

A common format for Collective Worship in schools is:

- **Gather** – something to help people to focus on being fully present with those around them and in the presence of God;
- **Engage** – Passages of Scripture or other helpful material;
- **Respond** – an opportunity to reflect or pray;
- **Send** – an invitation to allow what you have heard to make a difference.

Below are some ideas that might help you facilitate opportunities to mourn and celebrate a variety of circumstances.

Gather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We gather here today to think about (name(s)). To celebrate their life (lives) and acknowledge how sad it is that they are no longer with us. • We thank God (We give thanks for) for the gift of (name(s)), and for his love for us (the love that surrounds us) as we share together in our grief and sorrow. • We take this opportunity to think about the changes that have happened. To reflect on the (things, opportunities, events, people) that have been taken away from us, but also to remember with grateful hearts the things that remain
Engage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lamentations 3:12-25 • Psalm 139: 7-16 • Psalm 23 • A Dreadful Day or Goodbye at Last from the Lion Storyteller Bible • ‘Stay safe, stay home and God bless you all’ a poem and video about the nature of love and lockdown By Clonard Youth and Young Adult Ministry
Respond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why not try one of the Prayer Spaces in Schools/Prayer Spaces at Home Bereavement activities • Heavenly father, thank you for (name/thing/event(s)) and all that they meant to us. (If appropriate encourage people to share short sentences of what they are thankful for, (e.g. her big smile, his football skills, the opportunity it gave me, the way it made me feel important, etc.)). The Bible says you make nothing in vain and love all that you have made, and whilst we might not ever understand why bad things happen, we ask that we will know your comfort and peace in the midst of our sadness. Amen



Choose a memorial activity from the list below or from the list of resources. It doesn't have to be complicated, it doesn't always have to be completely serious. It can also be something that we revisit a few times as we experience our grief and loss in a new way.

Bottles of Tears

In the Bible, the King and Poet David understood from his own experience that life can sometimes be really hard and it can feel like we are all alone. In the poems he wrote, collected in the book of Psalms, he often has a good old moan before remembering what he believes about who God is and how he looks after him. In Psalm 56, he demonstrates his belief that God is right by his side when he is sad and upset by saying that God has collected all his tears in a bottle.

It is ok to cry, tears are our body's natural reaction to both sadness and joy, but it is comforting to think that God remembers all the times that they fall.

Create a symbol of this comforting image by slowly filling a bottle with water. If you are doing this at home as a family you could use a pipette or turkey baster. If you are doing this in school then use small cups and a larger bottle with a wide neck. Give everyone an opportunity to put a drop or cup of water into the bottle, and as they do so to think of something special about the person you are remembering. You can add glitter and sequins to the water if you wish, and then when the bottle is sealed shaking the bottle can remind people of the collection of memories of that person and the joy and sadness they bring

Timeline

Create a timeline covering the key events of the lifetime of the person they are grieving (e.g. for an adult - birth, school, wedding, children, job, first car, etc. For a child - birth, first steps, first tooth, nursery, school, etc). Augment the timeline with photos, pictures and other memorabilia.

Depending on the space available, the location and the purpose, the timeline could be a couple of sheets of A4, or be mounted along a wall, or laid out on the floor with enough space for people to walk around it and reflect. You could give mourners coloured post-it notes so that they can write comments and responses or indicate whether the event was a time of joy or sadness

The Scripture Union Bible Timeline shows God's story, the Bible from before time began to after time ends. If appropriate, talk about how God is always present in the times of joy and sadness that the people in the Bible faced

Cairns

In the Old Testament, people often used a pile of stones as a marker of a significant event.

Sometimes today you might see them as markers on country paths. You could use little pebbles or large rocks to create a cairn as a marker of either a bereavement or a significant event like the Coronavirus lockdown. Hand size pebbles can be decorated with paints or felt tips and varnished before the creation of the cairn. Large rocks might need to be moved

Send



by adults, but children could be responsible for planting in the gaps as symbols of growth and hope.

Trees

Trees appear a number of times in the Bible (e.g. Garden of Eden, Moses and the Burning Bush, Zaccheus) and can be a helpful metaphor about how we grow and change as we get older.

Jesus described himself as a vine, whilst not strictly a tree, his illustration helps us to think about how we are connected and where we draw our strength from.

Plant a tree in the school grounds to commemorate the person/people that has/have died. If there is no space why not talk to the local authority about the possibility of planting a tree in a nearby park.

Give everyone some red card luggage labels and some green ones. On the red cards they can write or draw the things they felt they 'lost' during the Coronavirus crisis (e.g. exams, time with friends, feelings of safety) and on the green cards the things that they feel they gained during the Coronavirus (e.g. more time with Mum, high score/next level on favourite game, taught grandparents to Facetime). N.b. This might be really hard for vulnerable children or ones who have been bereaved. Be sensitive and whilst not dismissing the huge loss, help them to think creatively about one thing that was good during the period.

Tie the labels to branches of a tree or bush (this can be done outside on a living tree - using environmentally friendly materials - or on dead branches brought inside). As you do this, you can acknowledge together the loss and celebrate the gain.

Organisations

Child Bereavement UK <https://www.childbereavementuk.org>

Child Bereavement UK offer a schools' information pack which is detailed and structured.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=a35f83e5-e4ad-49e1-8b01-7e7d55ffa528>

- It walks through many scenarios and includes scripts for what to say in assemblies, etc.
- It outlines what children's understanding of death is likely to be at different ages.
- There is an example policy for primary and secondary schools which can be adapted with the coronavirus pandemic in mind.
- There are also example letters to send out which could be adapted for email during the lockdown.
- They offer guidance on supporting children during the coronavirus pandemic.
<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=bc9f3d7d-7b43-421a-8ed4-4335f9c23b35>

National Helpline 0800 028840 (Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm) support@childbereavementuk.org.



Winston's Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/>

Winston's Wish is a charity which has many resources to help us specifically through this challenging time. Winston's Wish supports bereaved children, young people, their families, and the professionals who support them and this now has a Coronavirus (COVID-19) update.

Resources include:

- Saying Goodbye when a funeral isn't possible.
- How schools can support children.
- Talking to children about Coronavirus.
- Telling a child someone is seriously ill.
- Telling a child someone has died from coronavirus
- Ways to manage your anxiety about coronavirus.
- Death through serious illness.

National Helpline: 08088 020021 (Monday – Friday 9am -5pm) for therapeutic advice on supporting a grieving child or young person after the death of a loved one or email support on ask@winstonswish.org

What's Your Grief www.whatsyourgrief.com

This website has some helpful ideas:

- 10 Ideas for funerals and memorials when you can't be together
- When you can't be with a dying family member
- How to live-Stream a funeral or Memorial Service

Cruse Bereavement Care <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Cruse has dedicated set of resources for schools:

- It has specific section for schools and resources, for young people, for parents, for those supporting the bereaved and for understanding bereavement.
- It has a helpful 'page' on what to say <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus/coronavirus-what-say-when-someone-grieving>

Support helpline: 0808 8081677

Hope Again <https://www.hopeagain.org.uk/>

Hope Again is a sister company to Cruse. It is the youth website of Cruse and supports young people whose parent has died. It is a safe place where young people can learn from other young people, how to cope with grief, and feel less alone.

Resources include:



- Information about their services, a listening ear from other young people and advice for any young person dealing with the loss of a loved one.
- Personal stories/films and comments in a 'youth helpful' way

At a Loss <https://www.ataloss.org>

A Christian based organisation that has a helpful short film to support others who are bereaved
<https://www.ataloss.org/Pages/FAQs/Category/coronavirus-pandemic>

Church Army <https://churcharmy.org>

For those who work with young people, Church Army has produced a resource to help young people who have been bereaved by Covid-19: Death, Grief and Hope
https://churcharmy.org/Groups/290286/Church_Army/web/What_we_do/Resources/Resources.aspx?fbclid=IwAR0V6R1BOJDGWmH8e1zEWE1z8b2UxKGvEcVHXyuLzhEjpuTlaVZAB2P99Fw

Grief Encounters www.griefencounter.org

Coronavirus: Supporting Bereaved Children and Young People

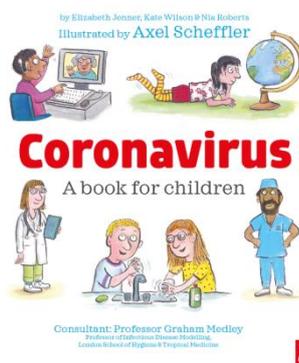
Helpline: 0808 802 011 (Monday – Friday 9am -9pm)

Education Support offer a free, confidential helpline for staff: 08000 562 561

Resources

- A free online book, **Coronavirus - a Guide for Children**

<https://axelscheffler.com/books-for-older-children/coronavirus>



This is a free digital information book for primary school age children to help explain the coronavirus and the measures taken to control it. It answers lots of questions in a child-friendly way, and aims to both inform and reassure. Published by Nosy Crow and illustrated by Axel Scheffler, the text had expert input from Professor Graham Medley of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and also two headteachers and a child psychologist.

- Grove Books: Education Series, **Journeying Through Bereavement in Schools** by Ian Terry
ISBN: 978 1 85174 809 9



- [Walking in their Shadow – Lex Bradley](#) published by BRF and written by someone who experienced bereavement as a young person, the book is full of helpful and practical tips and extra resources to support children and young people through grief, using Jesus' Holy Week experiences as a framework.
- There are many books available for children to engage with bereavement, either non-fiction or fiction. Both **Child Bereavement UK** and **Cruse** have book list available.

One such book is '**Waterbugs and dragonflies**', by **Doris Stickney** –*this a short story explaining death through the fable of the transformation of the dragonfly with a Christian perspective.*

Other websites that may be useful:

- WAY Widowed and Young: www.widowedandyoung.org.uk
- Samaritans: www.samaritans.org.uk
- Miscarriage Association: www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk
- The Compassionate Friends; www.tcf.org.uk
- Supporting Bereaved Staff in the Workplace – Top Tips for Managers; www.foryoubyyou.org.uk
- <https://www.dignityfunerals.co.uk/what-to-do-when-someone-dies/dealing-with-social-media-accounts-after-death>