

Penhaligon's Friends



Supporting Children with Death & Bereavement

During the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Situation

The current situation we are in with the COVID-19/Coronavirus is unusual and can feel quite frightening for all ages.

The impact of this situation is likely to change how we deal with death for some time.

When any death occurs there may be changes to the practicalities of what usually happens. For example, it may no longer be possible to visit the deceased in the chapel of rest and it may not be possible to hold family funeral services. It may also leave everyone without their usual support structures, routine and coping strategies.

Deaths will occur from COVID-19 and deaths from other causes will still continue to happen.

The way we mourn and grieve may be different, it may feel much lonelier and we may not have opportunities to feel as involved in the process as we would usually.

What can I do as a parent/carers?

Explain to your child as much about the disease as you can, whilst staying appropriate to their age. Inform them and educate them as best you can about government guidelines and advice such as washing your hands well, social distancing etc.

This situation is very difficult for any child to understand, and we are asking them to adapt to a new situation that removes most of the structures that feel safe and normal. The fear of the Coronavirus alone may be anxiety provoking and frightening.

Provide your child with as much routine and predictability at home as you can at the moment. Perhaps put together a daily timetable to make your child feel an element of safety and structure.

Children need the help of an adult to know what has happened and to understand that grieving for someone when they have died is natural. Children need the adults around them to show them that it's all right to be sad and to cry; that the strength of the hurt they feel now won't last forever.

You are likely to be the only emotionally available adult for your child at the moment.

Try to be willing to talk openly about the situation and about any death of a loved one. Your child is likely to cope better if you do this than if they try to work things out and manage difficult feelings on their own.

Remember - what children don't know – they make up!

A child's understanding will depend on their individual emotional development. The way an adult explains death, or matters relating to death, should be pitched at a level they are able to understand.

Whilst being honest with your child may feel difficult (as you will naturally want to protect them from the harsh reality of the grief and fear they may now face) you should try to be as open, simple and clear as you can when answering their questions.

When answering a child's questions, adults should keep in mind the following:

- Tell a child only what he or she is capable of understanding. There is no need to avoid the difficult stuff if they are able to understand it. You will need to change your explanations to what the child can grasp. An overly complicated reply often confuses a child.
- Use words that the child can understand.
- What is said is important, but the way you say it to them is even more important. Be aware of your tone of voice. Try to answer their questions in a simple, factual way without too much emotion.

It is common for children to ask the same question repeatedly. This is something they need to do to help them process and take on board what has happened.

How can I explain to my child that someone they love has died from Coronavirus?

Begin by breaking the bad news.

Do this as soon as possible to avoid your child finding out from someone else online or by phone.

See our guidance 'Breaking Bad News' below...

Breaking Bad News To Children

Remember Me Always



Bad news is best given as soon as possible by someone who knows the child well with support of family, friends or professionals.

1. GET READY

- * Know the facts because children will ask
- * Find a quiet place without too many interruptions
- * Choose a time when the adults are going to be around for a while - e.g. at a weekend
- * Have someone around who can support you

2. ASK QUESTIONS TO FIND OUT WHAT THE CHILDREN KNOW



3. GIVE A WARNING SHOT - "I have some sad news to tell you."

4. EXPLAIN IN STEPS

"You know Dad is in hospital? The doctors have found he has an illness. The illness is called cancer. Cancer is a serious illness and the doctors are not always able to make it better although they are going to try."



"I told you a few weeks ago that Dad had cancer and was not going to be well again. Well, now he is very poorly. He is not going to live for very long."



5. ANSWER CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS AT THEIR OWN PACE

6. BREAK THE BAD NEWS



7. ALLOW CHILDREN TO EXPRESS FEELINGS

You and your child may not be able to visit the body of the person who has died or attend the cremation or burial.

This could feel difficult for everyone. This takes away any control of the process we often need to be a part of, in the early days following a death, to say our goodbyes and share our grief together.

If a small funeral service is happening and you know when it is taking place you may want to do something to mark this time. If you are not aware of a service taking place, then set your own time and date to create something as a family.

You could talk to your child about what would normally happen when someone dies. Explain that you are not able to do these things because of the current situation and that in the future these things will return to normal.

Reassure your child that doctors and healthcare professionals are doing their very best and that the people involved in carrying out the cremations and burials will still treat their loved one's body with care.

Talk together about how difficult this feels, share your feelings about how this may feel unfair and distressing.

Here are some things you could do now.

Try to provide your child with something significant they can be involved in at the moment.

Plan your own special time together to remember at home, in the house or the garden. You may be able to arrange a special gathering with family and friends online, perhaps by Skype, Zoom or Facebook Messenger.

Perhaps you can all say a few words, play some special music and light a candle. You may choose to wear something special for this such as their favourite colour.

Set up a table with photographs on and special items, your child may like to draw a picture, write a letter or just sit and talk about memories together. Share pictures of the person who has died and ask others to send any they have through email or messenger.

Here are some things you could start planning for the future;

Plan for a future funeral memorial.

Think ahead and consider what you might like to do when things return to some normality and restrictions have been lifted.

You may want to consider getting family and friends together for a memorial at a place that feels significant to you. You may be able to talk to an Independent Celebrant or someone from your local church about a service.

You could plan and create your own order of service. You could spend time choosing or writing poems, music and readings.

You may want to write your own eulogy.

Your Funeral Director may have other ideas too.

Common Questions Children May Ask After Bereavement

What happens to the person's body – usually their body will be taken from the place where they died, to a funeral home. At the funeral home, they may be dressed in clothes that he/she liked and put into a casket/coffin. A casket/coffin is a box we use so that when they are buried in the ground, no dirt will get on them. Because their body isn't working any more, their body won't move or do any of the things it used to do. What we would usually do is have a special ceremony called a funeral to remember them where the casket/coffin will be closed and buried in the ground or cremated. At the moment we are unable to attend funerals because of the restrictions.

When will they come back? They can't. They didn't choose to leave; their body stopped working.

Why don't they move? They can't move because their body has stopped working.

Why can't they be fixed? Once the body has stopped working, it can't start again.

Are they sleeping? No. When we sleep our body is still working, our heart is still beating, our lungs are still breathing and we are just resting. Sleep is important for us to stay healthy.

Can they hear me? No. They could only hear you if their body was working.

Where do dead people go? You may find it helpful to explain that nobody really knows what happens when someone dies but what we do know is that their body no longer works. You could say that we find it comforting to think that the part of them that we know and love has gone somewhere else e.g. within us/in our hearts/in a special place called Heaven etc. as this is how we cope with them not being here with us anymore.

Children often confuse 'Heaven' with 'Devon'! Check their understanding by asking them about what they think.

Children need to know that the person did not choose to leave them (this may need variation if the cause of death was suicide (please refer to our 'Explaining Suicide to Children' handout). Be cautious about saying things like 'they have gone to a better place' as this can be hard for children to understand. This may make them wonder why they have gone without them or may make them feel like they are not good enough to be with. Some children may also say they want to die to go to this 'better place'.

Remember, always check how your child is feeling about any religious or spiritual beliefs you share with them.

Can they come back again? As per the previous question, explain that they can't come back as they were, however their memory still stays with us and, if related you may even feel it appropriate to explain that they are connected by blood still.

Why couldn't doctors make them better? In many cases when someone is unwell they will get better, even after accidents we often get better. Sadly, sometimes when a person's body is so unwell or damaged it stops working and can't be fixed.

Many people will have Coronavirus, be unwell and then recover, however there are times when it is very serious for some people. Seek advice on how to explain Coronavirus to children and help them distinguish how it is different to colds and coughs we usually get.

When will I stop feeling sad? It is okay to feel sad when someone so special dies. Perhaps we will always be sad that they are not with us. Over time we will be able to cope better with our sadness, and we will do this by supporting each other. At times we may need someone to talk to or someone to hug. Ask what you can do to help them when they feel sad and let your child know what you need when you are sad so that they can help, perhaps by giving you a hug or getting you a drink.

Why did they die? It is okay to explain to your child how the person died, even when the cause of death has been traumatic, for example suicide or murder. (see our separate guide on explaining death through suicide/murder) Keep explanations simple and explain that for anyone to die it must be a very serious reason. Make it clear that the illness or accident was a serious one and different from common illnesses and falls we all have from time to time.

Can I have new mummy/daddy now? Acknowledge for your child how difficult it may be for them not having their mummy/daddy with them now they have died, and that you know how hard it might be seeing all the other children with their parents. Let them know that even though they have died they will always be their mummy/daddy. You could explain that sometimes new relationships develop between the remaining parent and a new partner and the new partner may become an important person in their life as a step parent, but reassure your child that they will not replace the person who died. It will not mean we have forgotten them; we can still talk about them and remember them.

Will someone else die now or will I die? Whilst it may be tempting to promise your child that nobody else will die, this is not a promise you can keep. It could ultimately damage your child's trust in you, particularly with all they may be hearing in the news at the moment. You can acknowledge how frightened or concerned your child is about someone else dying and explain that everything that lives will die one day. You can reassure them that you hope to live for a long time yet. You could also reassure your child that it is very rare for children to die and that you expect them to live a very long life until they are old (be aware that we are all old to a 5 year old! You may need to explain lifelines in much more detail!) Reassure your child that someone will always take care of them.

Children's Responses

You may notice some normal responses in your child's behaviour. If they do not go on for too long or cause extreme distress, then they are likely to settle in time, particularly once they are back to usual routine.

- Behavioural difficulties or an increase in difficult behaviours they had before.
- Withdrawn behaviour or not wanting to talk.

- Difficulty sleeping, bad dreams or bedwetting.
- Clingy behaviour – wanting to be with parent/carer more.
- Changes in appetite.
- Fear that they may die or that someone else might die.
- More emotional and easily upset.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering information.
- Toileting accidents.

Children's emotions may appear to come and go which can be different to how adults manage bad news and emotions.

Teenagers may want to spend more time with friends which is unlikely to be possible. Teenagers are also an age group who are more likely to get involved in risk taking behaviours. Try to keep open communication with them and try to encourage them to find different ways of connecting with friends online or by phone. You may still be able to speak to someone at school on the phone, or your GP if you are concerned about them.

How you can help your child

- Try to talk openly to your child about their feelings and about the person who died.
- Share your emotions at times with your child. It can be helpful for children to see you are upset too rather than pretending everything is normal. Let them know that everyone gets upset when someone special dies.
- Let your child know that it is ok for them to cry and show their emotions. These emotions may include anger and guilt as well as sadness.
- Try to avoid using phrases such as 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep' as this can cause confusion for children. Use the words 'death' and 'died'.
- Routine can help provide a sense of safety. Try to keep to normal activities and routine where you can even though things are different now.
- If you are concerned about your child at any time, seek advice from your child's school or their GP. You may find it helpful to contact a local organisation who support children and families after bereavement, such as Penhaligon's Friends.
- If your child has witnessed a traumatic event, then make your GP aware so they can monitor your child appropriately.

Looking after yourself

Talking to your child about death and dying can be extremely hard and supporting them through a significant bereavement can be difficult for both of you, especially if you are grieving too. Try to take time to talk to your family and friends about your own feelings. Seek further support for yourself if you need to.

Further support

Penhaligon's Friends www.penhaligonsfriends.org.uk 01209 210624/215889

Penhaligon's Friends are a Cornwall based charity who support bereaved children, young people, parents and carers throughout the county and can offer telephone support and guidance.



www.cornwallbereavementnetwork.org

A network of organisations and services available to support anyone bereaved in Cornwall, of any age and from any cause of death.

Grief Encounter 'Grief Talk' support for bereaved children and young people either by phone or online www.griefencounter.org.uk 0808 802 0111

Grief Chat provide online support 9am -9pm for bereaved adults. www.griefchat.co.uk

Youngminds www.youngminds.org.uk

Parents Helpline 0808 802 5544

Samaritans on freephone 116 123, are a listening service open 24 hours.

Papyrus Hopeline (for under 35's) 08000684141 text 07786209697 www.papyrus-uk.org

Papyrus are there for young people who may be feeling suicidal or anyone concerned about a young person who may be impacted by suicide.

Childline 0800 11 11 www.childline.org.uk. Childline have an online counselling service for children and young people.