

Gone but not

FORGOTTEN

Coping with the death of someone special is tough for anyone, but for a young child the impact can be profound. **Cath Hunter** has some gentle advice. . .

Losing a parent or another loved one at any age can be devastating, and it is especially difficult for young children as they do not understand the concept of permanence and have limited language skills to enable them to process and express their feelings. Separation from the people we love is often one of the most distressing events of our lives – for a young child it can be both overwhelming and terrifying. Up to approximately four years of age, a child's awareness of death may be limited. She will be aware of the changes, pick up the feelings of others, and know that her sense of security has been shaken. She will notice that the person is absent but may be unable to make sense of what is happening; she will just know that this particular individual is missing.

It is important to remember that a young child may not comprehend the concept of death and he may not respond initially to hearing that someone 'has died'. When a loved one is gone and then still gone and then doesn't come back, a child may grieve at each moment when he feels that person's absence. The child will miss specific elements, such as his or her voice and smell, and activities that used to be experienced together. This sense of 'missing someone' will not necessarily be as a result of being told the person is dead.

First responses

A child's reactions to a death depend on a number of factors, such as how close she was to the person who has died and how involved that individual was in her life; whether the death was sudden or traumatic; and how the other members of the family are dealing with their grief. If it is a mother who has died, for example, the remaining parent may be less emotionally available as he will be processing his own grief – and vice versa. This can have an impact on the child as she experiences another form of loss.

It is helpful to respond to the child's reactions in a reassuring and sympathetic manner. He may be unsettled and clingy, particularly to the other parent, as he may

worry that he will lose that person, too. It could be that he will struggle to manage even small changes to his routine, and develop irrational fears about new things such as the dark, spiders, etc. He may have difficulty eating, and experience disrupted sleep patterns or nightmares. It is possible that he will regress to an earlier stage of development such as soiling, bed-wetting, thumb sucking, tantrums or using a babyish voice. He may also get upset more easily, cry more frequently, and be anxious and withdrawn. These are all indicators that the child is trying to make sense of what has happened and is working through his feelings.

Meeting needs

Adults sometimes try and protect children from the pain of knowing what has happened, but this can lead to distress and confusion later, so it is best to be as open and honest as possible from the start. It can be helpful to say something like, "Her body stopped working and when that happens the person dies, no one can keep living without a body." Children's questions need to be answered simply and honestly. Avoid euphemisms such as 'went to sleep' etc. as this can be confusing and lead to the child becoming afraid of anyone going to sleep. Children may ask questions repetitively and this will require acceptance and patience, as it is an important part of their grieving process. Young children believe that they cause what happens around them and they may worry that they made the death occur by misbehaving. This 'magical thinking' may result in them believing they can restore the dead person to life (e.g. "If I eat all my peas mummy will come back.")

Children need models of how to grieve, and to witness that it is natural to shed tears when you lose someone you love. Seeing adults upset about the loss of someone can normalise the child's feelings and her wish to cry. Attending a funeral can be healing for a child and can also be a vital method of closure for her, even if she does not fully understand what is happening. It's important for children to have the opportunity to remember and talk about the person who has died, both

immediately after the death and onwards through life. If a child is finding it difficult to speak then she can be encouraged to draw pictures. This is particularly useful for younger children who may not have the ability to put their feelings into words. It is crucial to consider the messages that a young child is receiving about the person who has died – if she thinks, 'I can't talk about daddy because it will make mummy cry', then this will have a detrimental effect on her grieving process. Once children accept the death, they may show their feelings of sadness, anger and anxiety on and off, over a long period of time, and often at unexpected moments. The surviving relatives should spend as much time as possible with the child, making it clear that she can show her feelings openly, without fear of upsetting others.

How can we help?

Young children do not have the language skills to express how they feel – they show us what they want and the emotions with which they are dealing through their behaviour. When working with a child who is experiencing bereavement it is essential that the rest of his life and daily routine is as consistent as possible to provide him with a sense of security and stability. The changes in behaviour he may show need to be responded to with empathy, support and understanding during this stressful time while the child tries to adjust to the huge absence in his life. Any changes that do take place at nursery need to be explained to the child clearly, with plenty of notice and reassurance.

As children get older they begin to understand the concept of death and with each developmental stage comes a different awareness. A child can be encouraged to make a memory box or book to remind her of the parent and this can help her to stay connected to that person. Children have incredible resilience and the impact of a bereavement early in their lives will depend on the other support they have around them. We need to remember that we do not 'get over' a significant death. We learn to live with it, accept it, and go on with our lives in a meaningful way.

Coping with Bereavement

FIVE POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO REMEMBER...

- 1** Be consistent – the child is managing a major change to his life, ensure his time with you is as reassuringly familiar and predictable as possible.
- 2** Acknowledge feelings – use opportunities throughout the day to talk about different feelings to help the child expand her emotional vocabulary.
- 3** Offer explanations – ensure that any change, no matter how small, is explained clearly and in advance to help the child to cope with it.
- 4** Accept behavioural changes – where possible ignore, distract and accept the small changes in behaviour. This is more likely to minimise their occurrence.
- 5** Encourage and support – use any opportunity to make the child feel good about himself, focus on his positives and provide plenty of praise and encouragement.

You can find help and advice for bereaved children and the people caring for them at the following websites:

- winstonswish.org.uk
- childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk
- www.childbereavement.org.uk



about the author

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