

HELPING A CHILD COPE



WITH THE
LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

Death can be bewildering and scary for any one of us, and especially for a child. As an adult you will be experiencing your own sadness and facing different challenges. It may be helpful for you to find people who can comfort and support you at this time, so you can comfort and support your child



Everyone experiences a death in a different way, and children are no exception. The most important thing is to create occasions for your child to talk so you can listen and respond to what they are thinking. It is helpful to accept whatever your child says, and ask simple but open ended questions to give you a fuller understanding of their thoughts, eg 'When do you most miss Grandma?'

This leaflet sets out a few practical ideas to help you through the challenging time.

Saying goodbye

- Simple honesty is usually the best policy. There are numerous adults who are still angry and bewildered by the way grown-ups hid death from them when they were a child, and did not allow them a chance to say goodbye to their loved ones.



- Don't force your child to attend a funeral service. Let the child make the choice. Tell them that it's okay to go and it's also okay not to go.
- Explain that a funeral is a time for saying goodbye to the person who has died, and that people will be sad

and may cry. Let them know that it will be alright if they cry, and also alright if they don't cry.

- Describe everything that will take place at the funeral, so that your child can understand what will happen and can make the choice whether to attend or not. It may be helpful to give your child a special role to play at the funeral, such as flowers to lay on the casket, a short poem to read, or a piece of music to play but let them choose what to do, and have the freedom not to do it if they change their mind at the last minute.
- Perhaps you could have a book at the funeral in which people could write their special memories of the loved one, or give out slips of paper to people, so they can write their stories on them, and collect them to stick into a book of memories for family members to read. Friends, colleagues and neighbours may have very different memories of the person, and you may discover some surprising new stories.



- The child may choose not to attend the funeral, so look for other ways for them to say goodbye. Encourage the child to write a letter to the person who has died, to light a special candle, or to visit the grave with you and say their own private goodbye.
- If possible, when a baby dies soon after birth, it may be appropriate and helpful for older brothers and sister to see the baby so they can say 'hello' and 'goodbye' to the baby themselves.



Coping with grief

- It is very important to create an open and caring relationship with the child, where the child can ask questions, talk about their feelings for the person, share memories, be involved with the funeral in some way (even just by attending). It is also helpful that it is made clear to them that adults and children can be sad and cry, freely, whenever they need to, and that it is good, natural, and healing to cry and be upset when someone we love has died.
- Every child will respond differently to bereavement, depending on age, temperament and many other things. Reactions include: tantrums, denial, feelings of guilt, irritability and tiredness, seeming indifferent or unusually 'good' or quiet behaviour.
- Try to maintain as normal a routine as possible. Children over about 2 years old should not be moved to a 'protected' environment. It is better for them to remain within their family home.
- Don't hide your own grief. Seeing you grieve, and talking with you about the person who has died, may help the child express his or her own feelings.



- Drawing and playing may help children work through their grief and express their feelings. Older children may like to create something special or keep a journal.
- Children are all different and like comfort in very different ways. It can be helpful to say something like, 'When you feel sad, it's ok to cry; go ahead and don't feel bad about it.'

When you cry, I want to be there with you, so come and find me, because it is better to cry with someone else, than to cry all by yourself. When you are sad, I wonder how you would like me to comfort you. Some people like to be hugged, some like other people just to sit quietly next to them, some like to sit and drink a nice drink. I wonder what you would like best.'

- One family had a 'comfort chair', an old squishy armchair with a soft blanket. Whenever the child was sad he would go and sit in the chair and then his mother would come and wrap him in a quilt, sit in the 'comfort chair', and hug him till he felt better again.

- Reassure your child that he or she does not have to feel guilty about having fun. Explain that the person who has died would be happy at the thought of the children enjoying themselves.



- Try not to burden older children by expecting them to be 'brave' or take the role of their dead parent or sibling.
- When someone dies there is a lot of saying 'goodbye'; this can be

very sad as it emphasises the loss. But a child doesn't have to say goodbye to everything. He or she can remember them by using some of their good qualities, such as skills, wise sayings, words of encouragement, etc, with them in their own life. So, if a grandfather enjoyed woodwork, perhaps a grandchild could remember him by learning to use his tools, making something out of wood, so that the child can 'say hello again' to a gift that his grandfather gave him when he was alive.

- Every child is unique, and every relationship is different. Don't be afraid to ask your child about their needs, wishes and ideas, and let them know that they can always talk with you about the person who has died and ask you questions. Keep talking and listening to your child, so that you're always ready to help him or her through the grief process.

School

- Your child may be scared of returning to school in case another death occurs to someone they love while he or she is away.
- Make sure you always arrive on time to meet your child.
- Remember, though, that going to school is a way of maintaining a degree of normality. It may also be the only place where a child can escape the atmosphere of grief at home.
- Keep in contact with your child's teacher to see how the child is coping at school. Also, warn teaching staff of anniversaries and birthdays that might be particularly sensitive times for the child.
- Talk to your child about his or her friends. Explain that friends (yours too) often find it difficult to know what to say or how to help.



Answering awkward questions

- As Adventists we often talk about death as a sleep and, although we understand this as adults, it can be very disturbing for children to hear that death is like a sleep, as to them it means that sleep is like death, and they can be afraid of sleeping, or of seeing other adults sleep. Using the word 'lost' can be confusing as it introduces a hope that the dead person may be found.

- Usually the best way to deal with the topic of death is to tell a child gently, however young they are, that a person has died, and that means the child will not be able to see them, talk to them and play with them again.

- Invite the child to ask any questions they want to ask about the death, and be open and honest with them in straightforward ways. Explain that the person can no longer feel pain, or heat, or cold. This may relieve some of the child's fears about burial/cremation.



- Offer short and clear answers to your child's questions and then, check that the child has understood what you have said. Be prepared for some unusual questions, and for some questions to be asked over and over again. Be patient with their questions, even if answering is painful for you. You can tell the child you will answer the question at another time that day, if you don't feel ready to answer it, but don't leave the question unanswered for too long.
- A child's question may be more straightforward than it appears. 'Where has grandma gone?' may not require you to delve into deep theology. It could just be a question about the location of the grave.
- Admit when you don't know the answers. This is a process you are going through together, and death and suffering invite many deep and complex questions and thoughts from all of us.
- Some children may feel that they are responsible for the death if the last thing they said to the person wasn't very kind, or if they were naughty. The child needs to be reassured that they were not responsible for the person's death.



- Older children may need reassurance over arguments they have had with the person who has died. Make it clear that old conflicts are forgiven and forgotten

- One way to tell a child about death, heaven and God is to use a book that has been created to help Adventists discuss death with their children. It is called 'I Miss Grandpa' and it was written to try and help children understand death from an Adventist perspective. See the list of resources at the end for more information. Suggest to children books they might like to read, exploring themes of loss and bereavement. A list of helpful fiction and non-fiction books can be obtained from the Child Bereavement Trust, but check whether the books support our understanding of death before giving them to the children, to avoid confusion. Take the time to discuss what they have read and how they found it helpful.
- Young children tend to know more than you think. They will notice a change in atmosphere at home, and may overhear conversations. Try to keep them informed of developments, rather than letting them hear things second-hand.

- Reassure your child that other healthy family members (including the child) have a long life ahead of them.

Ways of remembering

- In the early stages of bereavement, it may seem far too painful to worry about mementos. Later on, though, many people find these very helpful.
- Some children may like to have a link with the person who died at their special life events. If you find a half-finished tapestry, keep it for a granddaughter to complete when she's older, or finish it yourself, and give it to her made up as a cushion. Perhaps you can save other things from the loved one's belongings to give to your child at different stages in their life, such as a book when they start school, an old diary when they reach their teens, old love letters, or an item of clothing to wear at their wedding, and so on. You could say, 'I think your Grandma would have liked you to have had this today if she were here.'
- As time goes by, children may like to write special poems or stories. Assure them that they do not have to show these to anyone else unless they want to.
- It may be helpful to visit special places where your child used to go with the person who has died.
- Help your child to make a special collection of memories, in a box, or in a book. Collect photos, stories, cards sent to and from the loved one, a list of presents exchanged, and any special items that represent the relationship, and are meaningful to your child.
- You could also let your child choose something from the loved one's belongings that they can always keep to remind them of the special person. It could be an item of clothing, or a tool, a picture, a piece of furniture, or a cup. Help them find a way to keep it safe.
- Another idea is to make a small booklet where each page is a different



month of the year. Your child could draw pictures of memories shared at different times, the loved one's birthday, family traditions, sledging in January, a holiday by the sea in July, playing with Grandad on the computer at Christmas.

- You may like to choose a day for remembering the special person each year. It could be on their birthday, or the anniversary of their death. Choose activities to do that can become a tradition each year. This may be as simple as laying flowers on the grave, or eating their favourite meal, or having a brief memorial service, with some favourite hymns and a short prayer.

- You could plant a tree in memory of your loved one. Your child can choose the tree and help to dig the hole and plant it.
- At family events, when it feels as if someone is missing from the gathering because they've died, you could light a candle in their memory, leave an empty chair, or place flowers or their photograph in the empty place.
- Tell your child stories about the life of the person who's died. Maybe you could even write a miniature biography for your child, to fill in the gaps in their memory and give them a fuller picture of the person's life and achievements.



Organisations to contact for help or more information

Adventist Counselling Services

The counsellors are all well-trained and you can ask if anyone on the team has special skills with working with bereaved families.

NEC 0161 740 3602

SEC 0207 723 8050

The Association of Christian Counsellors

This organisation lists counselling organisations and Christian Counsellors in the different areas of the country, with their contact details and special skills. You can go to their website and then click on 'find a counsellor' on the panel to the right of the home page. Follow the instructions to locate someone near you who is skilled in bereavement counselling and/or working with children.

www.acc-uk.org

Local Hospice

Contact your local hospice for information about special groups that support children after the death of a loved one. These groups often use play, art, writing, and talking together to help children express their feelings, and are usually very respectful of different religious ideas about death.

Local GP

Talk to your local GP about the resources available for bereaved children and their families in your area. You may be able to access special grief counsellors and family therapy through your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team, but you will need a GP to refer you to these services.

The Child Bereavement Trust

This is a charity with online information for young people who have experienced bereavement.

Tel: 01494 446648

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Bereaved Parents Network

This is an organisation under the umbrella of the Christian charity Care for the Family. It runs regular days for bereaved families, including their children, and publishes brief newsletters. You can also visit their web-pages at:

www.careforthefamily.org.uk/bpn

Information sheets on a variety of topics, including bereavement, can be downloaded from:

www.careforthefamily.org.uk/supportnet/

SANDS - Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support

This is an organisation caring for the families who have experienced a stillbirth or neonatal death.

Help line 020 7436 5881

Email: support@uk-sands.org

www.uk-sands.org

The Childhood Bereavement Network

This organisation has a website with useful information, and also provides 1-1 and group support for bereaved children across the UK.

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

The BBC

The BBC has an excellent website where you can search for information on thousands of topics, including children and bereavement. These are constantly being added to and updated, as new programmes are aired and issues arise. Visit their website and write 'children and bereavement' in the search box on the first page. Click 'Search' and you will find dozens of articles that may be helpful to you.

www.bbc.co.uk

North American Division - Rainbows Ministry

The North American Division runs a special outreach ministry for bereaved children called 'Rainbows'. Facilitators attend a one day training programme and then commit to working with a group of 3-5 bereaved children for 13 weeks. An adapted version of Rainbows is also being used by groups in some parts of Britain. Local Hospices and doctors' surgeries would know of the groups in their area. For more information on the NAD Rainbows visit:

www.nadrainbows.org

Grief in the Family

This 14-minute colour, animated video looks at the ways children and young people respond to grief, and what the adults around them can do to help. It gives parents and carers an insight into the process of grieving, its physical and emotional effects, and the special needs of children and young people.

The video shows families from a wide range of backgrounds dealing with bereavement. It offers practical advice to parents who need to learn how to find support for themselves, while helping their children to express their feelings and handle confusing emotions. Stressing the importance of listening to children and answering their questions honestly, it encourages the development of communication and a supportive family environment.

A booklet containing background information is supplied free with the video. The pack is designed as a resource for those working with families and bereaved children. It raises awareness and facilitates discussion in parenting education classes, training courses or schools. It is also suitable for viewing at home by parents, carers, and children. It is also available with subtitles for deaf people.

www.leedsanimation.org.uk

Useful books and Publications

Adventist Books

**'I Miss Grandpa' by Karen Holford
Pacific Press, 2004, ISBN 0816320306**

This is a simple story to read to a child explaining the Adventist view of death. It is the story of the death of a favourite grandparent, and uses the metaphor of a caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly to illustrate life on earth, death and the resurrection to a new life and body when Jesus returns. The book also includes ideas for carers to help children through the grief process.

**'The Loneliest Grief' by Karen Holford
Autumn House (Stanborough Press) 1994, ISBN 1873796277**

This is a book about experiencing miscarriage. It explores a Biblical understanding of miscarriage and death, as well as hope and comfort for those who have been bereaved. It discusses some common experiences after there has been a bereavement, ways of responding to a grieving person, and ideas for staying close as a family through the grief experience.

Other Books that may be useful

It is important to read any of these books through yourself first, to check for places where the theology may not match your own. They contain some very helpful ideas which you may find useful, and usually you can insert your own beliefs about death into the occasional places where a reference may not match your own ideas.

**'Grandma's Party' by Meg Harper
Barnabus/The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2003, ISBN 1841013412
www.brf.org.uk**

This is a very useful book for children of 6-10, telling the story of the plans for a grandma's funeral, and how different people have different memories of her, and how those memories inspire them to create different things for the funeral

and the tea afterwards. The book includes practical and simple suggestions for ways in which a child could be involved in a funeral, the meal afterwards, and in continuing to remember their loved one. It includes useful prayer and scripture suggestions for a funeral. It contains occasional references to a dead person being in heaven, but you can easily substitute the idea that the person is safe in the care of Jesus, even though they are dead, and that they will one day rise again to be in heaven.

‘Guiding Children through Life’s Losses’ by Wezeman, Fournier and Wezeman

Twenty-Third Publications, 1998, ISBN 0896229386

This book offers a range of different activities for helping children through a wide range of losses that they may experience, such as illness, death, divorce, moving away, the death of a pet, the loss of a parent’s job, the end of school year, losing a friend, losing face, etc. It is filled with a gentle sensitivity to the losses a child faces, acknowledges them as being important, explores different responses to the losses, with a focus on comforting the loss, and finding ways to grow through the experience.

‘Remembering Gran’ by Jacqueline Harding

CARE, 2002, ISBN 1842 980 874

This is short story about the death of a grandma which includes a few ideas about helping children deal with a death in the family.

‘Healing a Teens Grieving Heart’, by A.D. Wolfelt

Companion Press, ISBN 1879651246

This is a book of 100 practical ideas for the families, friends and caregivers of bereaved teenagers which has been written by a grief counsellor.

Most of these books are available to borrow from the SEC Children’s Ministry Department. Call 01923 232728 for more information.

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www.themothersunion.org

