

Helping my child as they cope with Trauma and Grief

We hope that this booklet will help you to help your child during a time of trauma and grief. We have gathered resources from NEPS (National Educational Psychology Service) and Barnardos to help put this booklet together. We will cover the following topics in the booklet:

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1. Children's Understanding and reaction to Death according to age

We all cope and react to death differently. For children, how they understand death depends on their age and stage of development. Being aware how our child understands death according to their age group can help us, as parents, to guide them through and to also recognise if they are not coping well. This information is taken from the NEPS resource- Responding to Critical Incidents.

Children's understanding and reaction to death will depend on their age and their developmental stage. The following are guides only as children will differ in their reactions and grasp of events for a range of reasons other than age alone.

AGES 0 – 2 YEARS

- Infants do not understand the meaning of death
- They may display anxiety when separated from a loved one
- They may appear upset, subdued and uninterested in their surroundings.

AGES 2 – 5 YEARS

- No understanding of the permanency of death
- May search for the missing person from a loved one
- May feel responsible for the death in some way
- May become apathetic and depressed
- May regress to an earlier stage of development e.g. thumb sucking, bedwetting, tantrums or may become clingy
- May develop fears of going to sleep
- May worry that other loved ones may die.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Continuity of normal routine e.g. mealtimes and bedtime
- Offer physical comfort
- Explain the death in clear, simple language, using words like "dead" and "died" - Do not use terms like "gone to sleep" or "passed away"
- You may need to repeat the same information again and again
- Permit them to ask questions and be consistent in your answers
- Reassure them that they had nothing to do with the death and of the wellbeing of other family members.

AGES 5 – 9 YEARS

- Beginning to realise the permanency of death, but their idea of life after death is still vague
- May have concerns about how the deceased is feeling or what he/she is thinking in the grave
- May have a lot of questions about aspects of the death e.g. how the person died, what they looked like, the funeral, heaven, coffins
- The reaction of their peers is important, they may feel 'different' to them
- Their peers may be awkward about the death and avoid contact
- They may become the target of bullying.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Encourage the child to talk and cry about the deceased if they wish to, otherwise respect their silence
- Answer questions and provide as much factual information about the death as possible
- Reassure them that thinking and feeling ceases after death
- Be vigilant in relation to bullying.

ADOLESCENTS

- Fully understand the finality, universality and inevitability of death. Their experience of death is similar to adults
- May have a range of feelings: guilt, regret, anger, loneliness etc.
- Death adds to the already confused array of emotions experienced by adolescents
- May appear to not care about the death
- May seek support outside of the family.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Offer them time to listen
- Allow them to express their grief in their own way
- Be prepared for mood swings
- Don't feel left out if they seem to value their friends more than their parents
- Children's use of social media should be monitored and supported by parents.

If parents are grieving themselves, they may be emotionally unable to support their other children. In this instance, another supportive adult in the child's life, e.g. other family members, friends, neighbours may need to offer emotional support.

It should be remembered that for children with special educational needs, their understanding of what has happened will be in line with their developmental age.

How might my child react to death?

The following information is taken from Barnardos -Parents Coping with Death. Some children may feel all of these reactions while others may only feel a few. Between the first and second year after the death, the child may not feel the loss so acutely and acceptance of the death may settle in. Sometimes the reaction to grief may be delayed, with grief only coming to the surface several years later. Being aware of the common reactions below can help parents to see that how their child is reacting is normal and part of the grieving process. Also, as parents, showing our children that we are open and available to talk about death will give our children the space to talk about their feelings and fears. Talking will also help our children understand what has happened and to work through their worries or fears around death. Sometimes, if a parent is also grieving, it can be difficult for the parent to be open to talk about death with their child. It can be a good idea to involve the help of another family member, friend, teacher or a support service to help you and your child cope with grief.

How might my child react to a death?

Children of all ages, even infants, can have grief reactions. Children react to death in a variety of ways. Some children will react immediately to loss while other children can have delayed reactions. Some children will have many of the following reactions, some will only respond in a few of these ways.

Common early responses to loss include:

- **Shock** – Including tears, shivering and sleep disturbances.
- **Numbness** – Inability to make sense of what has happened, withdrawal or clingy behaviour.
- **Denial** – Feeling that it can't be true, therefore attempting to block it out by appearing unconcerned or unaffected.
- **Sleep disturbance** – Nightmares, fear of the dark.

After the initial reaction to the death, your child may experience some or all of the following reactions:

- **Anxiety** – *'I feel sick just like my dad before he died.'* Fears about leaving a parent to go to school.
- **Loneliness** – Rejection, crying and searching. *'Why did he leave me?'*, *'Why did this happen?'*, *'Where has she gone?'*
- **Anger** – *'How could she have left me?'*, *'Why did the doctors not save him?'*, *'Why did this happen?'*, *'Where has she gone?'*
- **Guilt** – *'Maybe I am responsible for the death'*, *'My bad wishes have come true'*, *'If only...'*
- **Wishful thinking** and wishes to be reunited with the person who has died.

Many of these feelings remain for some time after the death and can be quite strong at times.

2. Stages of Grief

This information is taken from NEPS-Responding to Critical Incidents.

Grief is a normal and healthy response to loss. Although there are distinct phases in the grieving process, people experience these phases differently and at different times.

Generally, the grieving process in adults is thought to take about two years, while with children and adolescents it may be over a longer period with the child experiencing varying stages of grief as they reach different developmental milestones.

Denial, numbness, shock (up to 6 weeks)

- Death of the person may be denied
- Emerging feelings may be suppressed
- Refusal to talk about the death
- Bereaved keeps very busy to avoid thinking about the death
- Bereaved may show signs of confusion and forget everyday routines
- Children in shock may display either silent withdrawal or outbursts of crying.

Acute grief/searching and longing for deceased (6 weeks to 4 months)

- Acute sadness – crying
- Physical pangs of pain including loss of appetite and disturbed sleep
- Emotional pain accompanied by dejection, hopelessness, lack of concentration
- Fears of life after death, nightmares, ghosts
- Disorganisation
- Strong guilt feelings and questioning of self and others, particularly in the case of a sudden death
- Feelings of anger at the departed for leaving them
- Bereaved may reject offers to comfort them.

Adaptation to life without the deceased (6 months to 18 months)

- People begin to adjust to their lives without the person who is gone
- Sense of isolation
- Fearful of forgetting the deceased
- Less crying and irritability
- Exacerbation of existing personality problems. Children with low self-esteem may be at a greater risk of emotional/behavioural difficulties.

Normalisation of life

- Getting on with life
- Returned sense of humour and play
- Able to participate emotionally in new relationships
- Changed relationship with the deceased – able to think of the deceased without pain
- Reduction in physical/emotional symptoms
- Less guilt.

3. When should I seek additional help for my child?

In the following instances it is a good idea to seek additional help for your child. Express confidence in your child's ability to get through this difficult time and show hope for the future. See the supports mentioned at the end of this booklet to guide you. Information also from Barnardos.

- If a teenager is having reactions to a death that is interfering with their ability to carry on their daily routine or experience the different stages of grief. Some children might get 'stuck' on the traumatic way the person died and not be able to process their grief.
- If a teenager's behaviour undergoes a dramatic change such as isolating totally from friends, staying in their bedroom, and/or are complaining about aches and pains which have no medical cause.
- If a teenager witnessed or survived an event which resulted in another person's death, like being in a car when an accident occurred or seeing the fight which resulted in someone's death.
- If a teenager is still reacting in a way that indicates they are troubled by memories and thoughts (nightmares, sleep disturbances, restlessness and excessive activity, for example), withdrawing from others, avoiding anything that may remind them of what happened, or showing reactions which indicate an almost constant sense of danger (they are always on guard, are excitable, irritable and so on). They may be experiencing physical symptoms such as tummy aches, headaches, racing heart.
- If strong or overwhelming feelings continue with the same intensity over time. These might be anger, guilt, shame over the traumatic death. The child might be blaming themselves, not be able to trust anyone, believing the world is unsafe.
- A complete absence of feeling or emotion or a strong sense of 'going blank/ blanking out' can also indicate a traumatic response which a teenager may need professional help to understand and manage.

4. How to cope when something terrible happens

The following tips are for the child or teenager going through a traumatic event. It can be a good idea for the parent to sit down and go through these with their child. These tips will allow the child to see that it is ok to go ahead with their normal routine, to have fun and to also become upset and cry. This information is also taken from NEPS.

- Reach out – people do care
- Talk to your friends, family and teachers - talking is the most healing medicine
- Remember you are normal and having normal reactions – don't label yourself as crazy or mad
- It is acceptable to cry
- It is acceptable to smile
- If your feelings and reactions seem different from those of your friends, remember everyone reacts differently
- When the stress level is high there is a temptation to try to numb the feelings perhaps with alcohol and drugs, this complicates matters rather than bringing relief
- Some people find that writing or drawing is helpful. What about writing a note or letter to the family of the person who died or the person themselves?
- Spend time with people who have a positive influence on you
- Make as many daily decisions as possible. This will give you a feeling of control over your life, e.g. if someone asks you what you want to eat – answer them, even if you're not sure
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal – don't try to fight them – they'll decrease over time and become less painful
- Make a special effort to take care of yourself during this time. Try to get some extra sleep, eat nutritious foods and get some exercise, even if it is just a walk
- Sticking to your "normal" routine helps. Structure your time – keep busy
- Take time out – go for a cycle or kick a football
- Provide some balance to the negative things that have gone on by doing something special or fun for yourself. Think about something that makes you feel good. Then make it happen – like going to the cinema, listening to music, calling a friend, etc. Laughter is good medicine. Watch a funny movie or play a silly game with younger children to lighten your spirits
- Use of social media can help but do not rely on it as your only source of support

5. Ways to help your child through a difficult time

It is very hard, as a parent, to see your child going through a difficult time. It is also hard to know what to do in these difficult situations. Be confident that you are already showing your love and support to your child. They know that you are there to help and support them in any way they need. The following are some tips, also taken from NEPS, which show ways to help your child.

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- Listen carefully. Let them tell their story. Tell them that the reactions they are having are normal
 - Pay extra attention, spend extra time with them, be more nurturing and comforting
 - Reassure them that they are safe
 - Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse". People are not consoled by such statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help them
 - Do not be surprised by changes in behaviour or personality. They will return to their usual selves in time
 - Don't take their anger or other feelings personally. Help them to understand the relationship between anger and trauma. Help them find safe ways to express their feelings e.g. by drawing, taking exercise, or talking
 - Help them to understand that defiance, aggression and risk behaviour is a way to avoid feeling the pain, hurt and or fear they are feeling
 - When going out, let them know where you are going and when you will be back
 - If you are out for a long time, telephone and reassure them
 - Tolerate regressive behaviour such as nail biting, thumb sucking, or the need for a night light
 - Share your own experience of being frightened of something and getting through it
 - If they are feeling guilt or shame, emphasise that they did not choose for this to happen and that they are not to blame. Even if they were angry with the person who died, or had been mean to them, this did not make it happen
 - Work with the school support services and other available services
 - As well as advising your child about appropriate use of social media, monitor their use, particularly during this vulnerable time. Useful website: www.webwise.ie

6. Support Services

- **Barnardos**- offers support services for children and families. Phone the Clonmel office on 052 6170665. Barnardos also have a bereavement support service, call 01 4732110.
- **Foroige**- Foroige is a youth organisation who work with young people from 12-18. Contact Sheridan Brady for information on the Youthwork programme on 086 384 8160 and Siobhán Clifford for Family Support on 086 384 1866.
- **HSE Psychology Drop In Clinic**- the psychology drop in clinic gives access to a psychologist to offer advice to a parent on their own or with their child. For the Waterford service phone 051 842 982 and the Tipperary service phone 052 617 7911.
- **CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service)**- speak to your GP for referral to CAMHS
- **Samaritans**- helpline available 24 hours a day to those in need of support. Call 116 123.
- **Childline**- a support service for children and teenagers. Call 1800 66 66 66 or text 50101.
- **Nano Nagle Centre**-offers private counselling to children and adults from the age of 12. Call 051 642 418.
- **Rainbows**- supports children and young people affected by loss because of bereavement, separation and divorce. Call 01 473 4175 www.rainbowsireland.ie
- **GP Support**- if you have concerns about how your child is coping it would be a good idea to make an appointment with your GP for advice. Keep your GP informed if your child is attending any other service.
- **A&E**- if you are very concerned about your child's mental wellbeing, bring them straight to A&E.

Useful Websites

- www.barnardos.ie The Barnardos website has a great range of resources for parents including their free Parenting e-books.
- www.childhoodbereavement.ie The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network have a lot of resources about bereavement on their website.

- www.jigsaw.ie A website for young people with a lot of helpful resources and online support.
- www.tipperarychildrenandyoungpeopleservices.ie for details of the range of services available in South Tipperary.