

The Needs of Bereaved Children

The following notes draw heavily on the work of **William Worden** as well as our own experience of working with bereaved children. In *“Children and Grief”*, (Guilford Press, New York, 1996) Worden summarises the findings of the two year long Harvard bereavement study, which charted the impact of the death of a parent on children.

Worden states that children have ten needs.

1. Adequate information.

Children need clear information, given in age-appropriate language, for instance, “He’s died”, rather than phrases such as “We’ve lost him”. It is important to give enough information without overwhelming a child. Sometimes the honest answer to a child’s question may be “I don’t know”, or “I can’t tell you just now”.

Sometimes with traumatic death (e.g. suicide or murder) or sudden loss (e.g. parent leaving unexpectedly or losing a home due to flood, etc) it may help to provide information in stages over weeks, months or even years. Giving simple facts at first (e.g. “Daddy died last night” or “Daddy has gone to live in another house”), can be followed with more information later, perhaps prompted by the child’s questions.

Some key aspects of death or loss may need to be repeatedly explained to younger children. It is important that they are helped to understand about the physical reality of death, that it is an irreversible transition from one state to another, and that people who are dead feel no cold, hunger or pain. Some families have spiritual or religious beliefs about death. If talking about these matters, it is helpful to separate out what happens to someone’s body and their soul or spirit. It is important to respect the child’s and family’s views. If at all possible, it is helpful for children to be given some preparation if someone close to them has a terminal illness. If the child has experienced a traumatic sudden loss, further details could be offered as they become available or as the child asks questions. If you don’t know the reasons, be honest and say so, while reassuring as much as you can.

2. Fears and anxieties addressed.

It is a natural reaction to feel frightened following a death. Children may particularly fear that a surviving parent (or carer) will die or that they may die themselves. Sometimes lack of understanding about a particular death, or death in general, may exacerbate fears. Fears are often worst at night, especially at bedtime or at other times of separation (e.g. going to school, staying at someone else’s house). Giving the child something to look after, or something to look forward to, helps them to understand that the separation will be short (a transitional object).

It is important to reassure wherever possible, but equally it is important to be truthful.

For example, a bereaved child who asks a surviving parent, "Will you die?" will not easily accept a statement which offers false certainty, such as, "No, of course not." This child already knows that parents can die, maybe in sudden and shocking ways. However, a suggestion that the surviving parent will probably live a long time ("Look at Grandma, she is 87!") and sharing plans about who would care for them in the unlikely event of early death can be reassuring.

Clear accurate information helps to reduce fears - for example, talking about dad dying from a brain tumour and explaining how this is different to feeling poorly and having a headache. (At this point a good idea would be to explore consequences of different levels of seriousness of illness).

3. Reassurance they are not to blame

Young children are still learning the difference between things that they caused to happen and things that had nothing to do with them. For example they naturally experience extremes of emotion and may connect an earlier angry tantrum with someone's death. It may be necessary to give them clear, repeated messages that they are not to blame.

4. Careful listening and watching

We all show our thoughts and feelings in many ways, not just by what we say. Children may express their feelings through their play, behaviour and the way they relate to others. Maybe they do not do things they always used to enjoy, or it seems very important to do something that Daddy did. Children may go very quiet at a particular time, or make a big fuss about something that might appear insignificant.

Sometimes it can be helpful to find out what is behind a question. For instance, if a child asked: "What happened to Sharon when she died?" it might be worth saying: "I wonder what you think?". The child's answer to this question may reveal more precisely what he wanted to know as well as helping him to find his own answers. This question might be about what caused her death, the physical changes in the body following her death, a spiritual question about her soul or something else entirely. (Ask more questions in appropriate language about what they want to know. Book suggestion)

5. Validation of Individuals' feelings

The Harvard bereavement study found that 2 years after death one quarter of the children had been admonished for not showing enough feeling, whereas another quarter were told they should have finished grieving. This latter group included children who reported high levels of crying into the second year (Worden).

Allow for individual differences both in feelings and in the expression of feelings. There is not one way to grieve; in fact there are as many ways to grieve as there are people.

It is important to let a bereaved adult or child know that the death, however painful, is something they can talk about. However, it is not helpful to make comments like: "I know how you feel", "You've got to be brave", "You should try and forget it", or "At least you've got another sister". These all have the effect of stopping any real conversation about what has happened, and denying the reality of the loss.

Sometimes validating a feeling, especially feelings of despair or deep pain, helps us to move through those feelings, at least temporarily. When we believe it is not OK to feel something our feelings can get locked away inside us. This can make them harder to deal with and may lead to difficulties in later life (delayed grief).

6. Help with overwhelming feelings

We all sometimes need to protect ourselves from difficult or painful feelings. Sometimes young children want to pretend that something awful has not happened, or at least forget about it for a while. It is important to respect this need at the same time as providing an environment that encourages confidence in our natural capacity to deal with difficult emotions.

Sometimes children will feel very angry, destructive, anxious, or withdrawn. Carers need to balance children's need for consistent boundaries and expectations about their behaviour, with an acceptance that they may be less capable than you would ordinarily expect from a child of their age. For instance they may temporarily go backwards with potty training or dressing themselves (Puddle jumping as opposed to river wading).

Being alongside a child in play or other activity may provide opportunities to help them express their feelings. For example, "Teddy's feeling really angry because his mummy's died and he can't see her again."

7. Involvement and inclusion.

It is important to involve children in acknowledging and commemorating a death. This may include visiting a sick person before death, seeing the body after death, their involvement in the funeral and their opinions about memorials. Seeing how the death affects their family and friends will help children to feel less alone.

Even where families have clearly defined choices or traditions around death, a child may still be able to contribute something to a funeral or memorial.

In the case of a serious loss a child should be involved and included in any life changes which affect them, such as a house move or the acquisition of a new pet, etc. These decisions shouldn't be made purely by adults where possible. Ideally children should be given age appropriate choices as often as possible, e.g. choosing new colour scheme in bedroom at new house or additional bedroom.

8. Continued Routine Activities

Children benefit from being able to continue routine, previously enjoyed activities and interests. It is sometimes hard for adults to see children wanting to carry on with things so soon after a death. It is natural for children to dip in and out of grief (puddle jumping Winston's Wish), and just as adults need to carry on with the normal routines of daily life (making meals, cleaning the house etc.) (river wading WW), so children need to play. Play may naturally include re-enactment of events surrounding the death or illness.

It is especially important following traumatic loss to provide as much stability and continuity as possible. The death or loss of someone close is often very frightening. The child needs familiar activities and people to help them realise that, though life will never be the same, there are still many things that remain constant.

9. Modelled grief behaviours

"Children learn how to mourn by observing mourning behaviour in adults."
(Worden p. 145).

Through sharing our own experience we can provide repeated opportunities for a child to make sense of and share their own feelings. It is important to be true to ourselves and open about our own feelings, but we must also be sensitive to a child's needs when talking to them.

There may be information that it is not appropriate for a child to know at this time.

Adults can promote an environment where it is easy to talk about the deceased and to acknowledge good and bad memories.

When talking about such things it is natural to feel sad. It is also important to acknowledge anger, guilt and fear, but to do this in a way that does not overwhelm the child.

10. Opportunities to remember.

When someone who played a significant part in a child's life dies or leaves, there will be countless moments when the child is reminded of their absence. When a family is able to speak about the deceased naturally, it helps a child to make sense of their own reality. At the same time it is important to respect that any individual may sometimes need to protect themselves from pain, and there may be times when a child does not want to talk about the deceased.

Sometimes when significant events are coming up, like anniversaries, Christmas, or other festivals, it is useful to plan in advance how the day will be spent. Families have found it helpful to do something in memory of the deceased at the beginning of special days, for example, looking at photos (or other items which have significance) and talking about the person who has died. Such times can also be a good opportunity to remind children that it is OK to have fun, perhaps by saying something like: "I'm sure Mummy would want you to enjoy today as much as possible, though we are bound to feel sad when we are missing her."

Very young children who never met their deceased parent or sibling may not feel the need to ask questions about them – but older ones will. And as teenagers develop their own identity, it is helpful for them to have a sense of where they come from. It is much less painful for children to grow up with this knowledge than for them suddenly to find out later on.

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