

1



The challenges

There are many challenges facing anyone offering support to bereaved children and young people, but the challenges facing the bereaved themselves are much greater and lifelong.

What to say and how and where to offer support

When visiting a family following a bereavement, the children may well be overlooked or their voices unheard. It will be important to listen and try and find out what a child or young person understands about the death. This understanding will depend on many factors, including their age, intellectual ability, and their relationship with the deceased. The relationship will differ from person to person in a family and it may be that the deceased wasn't related by blood but "felt like family".

Children often overhear conversations and, if they don't understand what they have heard, they will make the information "fit" what they do know. "Your dad is at peace now" may be interpreted as "dad is having a really peaceful afternoon after having experienced a lot of pain". This was how a thirteen-year-old initially responded on hearing of the death of her father.

Case study

Mary (not her real name) came along to a training session for adults wishing to facilitate bereavement support for children. During the training she was able to share the feelings she remembered from twenty years previously when her dad had died. She was aged thirteen. Although she was aware that her father was ill, she wasn't aware just how seriously ill he was and that his death was expected in the very near future. When her mum came downstairs to say that her dad was "at peace" she remembers the relief she felt that he was peacefully sleeping and not in pain. This relief only lasted a few moments and the reality dawned, that dad had died. Mary spoke powerfully about how she wished someone had told her the seriousness of the situation. She had been "protected" from the pain, but this also meant that she wasn't prepared for the loss,

hadn't been able to speak about it or had her questions answered. When a collection was taken at the funeral for a cancer charity, she asked why, and was then told that her dad had suffered from cancer. It took many years for Mary to come to terms with what she felt as an exclusion from the family and she struggled to trust those closest to her.

Mary was an intelligent child from a caring, loving family who had tried to protect her from pain. In reality, she needed to feel included in the family's grieving and to receive the necessary knowledge and support.

Although a faith in a loving and caring God may support the adults, it may be difficult for a child to rationalise this loving God beyond "someone who has taken away" their parent. Euphemisms are never helpful for children as they may cause confusion. To have lost someone implies that we may find them. If someone has "gone to sleep with Jesus" – will they wake up? If he or she has "gone to a better place" – didn't they want to stay with me?

The idea of God as a loving father is difficult for many children who have never experienced a loving father and may well not have experienced having a father in their lives.

Each person will react in their own unique way to any form of bereavement and as adults supporting the grieving child or young person we must carefully listen, notice any physical reactions and be aware of any misunderstandings.

An example of this happened when a group of children were told that their teacher had died. She had been away from school for many months, so the youngest children didn't really know her. They heard people say that she was now "in heaven with Jesus". One child reacted by saying that she was sure Mrs X would now be having a lovely time in heaven with Jesus. Another child didn't want to pray any more or hear about Jesus in case he decided that Jesus wanted his mum to have a lovely time in heaven too.

It is much more helpful to speak clearly when someone has died: “I am sorry to hear that [Name] has died,” rather than, “I am sorry to hear that [Name] has passed away.” There is no confusion with the first statement. It is important that those supporting a grieving child make it clear that they know what has happened and they are not waiting for the child to tell them. This is very important as a child returns to school, out-of-school activity or to their church community. As adults we have a duty to make the transition as easy as possible and, while respecting the wishes of the child, offering to be there if they want to talk.

Schools have an important role in supporting the bereaved child and there are charities able to help in this role. Having a clear bereavement policy and procedures in place will assist the school greatly at this difficult time. The material in *When Somebody Dies* (Rainbows Bereavement Support GB, www.rainbowsgb.org) will help schools in this task.

It is important to ask the child or young person how they want people to react. Do they want people to talk to them about the death, or do they just need to know that people know about it and “just get on with things”, knowing that support is there if they need it.

If the child or young person is returning to a community group, for example Brownies or a church group, choir or a youth group, are all the members prepared for their return? It helps everyone if the other members of the group have been prepared and given help to know what to say. A simple, “I’m sorry for your loss,” or “I’m sorry to hear about your gran,” will help. The bereaved child needs to be reassured that people do know, they don’t have to explain anything, and they don’t have to talk about it unless they want to.

Death is a difficult subject to approach with a child, but it is up to the adult to make this as easy as possible. When asked to visit and support a bereaved child we need to tell the truth about what has happened in age-appropriate language. If we are to break the news of a death, then it is important that we have the facts as far as they are known; that we try and find an appropriate room to break the news, not on a corridor, and that we tell the truth about what has happened.

One adult, many years after the death of her parent in a road incident, said:

I was at school and I knew something was wrong when I was called out of class and my brother was too. The headteacher took us to one side and told us that there had been an accident. She said that my daddy was injured and in hospital but that Mummy's injuries were too serious and that she had died. I always remember that we were sitting in the cloakroom and there was a smell of wet clothes. I'm sure she was doing her best in a difficult situation but perhaps a warm room would have been better. She hadn't really thought it through because she didn't then know what to do with us then until relatives came for us. Actually, the police were lovely, and they did help. It is strange what you remember.

When we experience significant loss our memories may be of very insignificant things, for example the smell of wet clothes in the cloakroom, but they are linked to the significant event and by that become significant in themselves. The comment that was made, the look that was given or the feeling of not being included – all take on a deeper significance. They will need to be shared in a safe environment, to allow the child to express what they think they have seen or heard and have any misunderstandings clarified.

As we continue to visit and support the child we need to try and actively listen to what she or he is saying, so that we will begin to see what they are feeling, and to correct any misunderstandings. We may have to answer the same question repeatedly. This reassures the child and helps them to process the huge loss in their lives.

We need to be honest about our own feelings and respectful of theirs. Tears can show how much we care and give the child permission to cry and grieve too, but we must also have some control over our reactions. It isn't helpful if we completely lose control. We need to have thought through the situation and gauge how we might respond and almost practise our reactions and

comments. It is important that we keep focused on the child who has experienced the bereavement and not recount our losses. We need to show empathy but refrain from saying things such as, “It was just the same for me when...”, or, “I know what you are feeling.” Each bereavement is unique. Each child is unique and our responses to bereavements will also be unique.

