

## Helping to support children with bereavement

By Mrs McCarthy

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I am not a bereavement councillor. I am no expert on bereavement. However, I am an ELSA. As part of my training, I learned how to support children and sometimes adults, when someone has died. I have also found over the years that certain things I can do or say help enormously.

It is important to know that EVERYONE IS DIFFERENT and not everyone will react the same when someone has died. However, it is likely that most will need some kind of support from another person. That could be a parent, teacher, ELSA, Mentor, councillor, friend or anyone who is able to offer time and listen.

The first thing I would say is to make sure YOU the person who is going to support is ok. You will have your own experiences around grief and if you are the parent, you too could be needing support at this time. So it is important that the person who is working with the child is feeling ok about it.

Secondly, Listen. Let the child speak. **If they want to.** Some children don't want to speak as it is too painful. Give them time and let them know that when they are ready to talk, you will be there. Most will want to. They may ask questions. Answer them as honestly as you think they can cope with. Too much detail is not helpful.

Use words like death, died, dead. It is tempting to talk about falling asleep, but it is advised that these kind of statements are not helpful for children. Some children have been known to think that their loved one will wake up.

Children may want to cry. It is ok to cry. Crying is good. Do encourage children to do whatever is best for them. If this means crying, then that is fine.

There are stages that everyone will go through including children. These include shock, anger, denial, sadness and acceptance.

These will come and go.

Just when you think someone is ok... they may start all over again. It can take a long time. I have noticed that children I have worked with have shown progress, then suddenly, it all comes back and they are back to showing deep sadness again. Anyone of us who has ever lost anyone will have experienced these stages. However, as we are all different we can't know how someone else is really feeling.

### **So what do I do to help?**

In my work, I have found that a memory box will often help. Memories are a way of helping us to deal with grief. I encourage children to get a box, decorate it and put in it anything that reminds them of their loved one. Photographs, jewellery, cards, etc. I encourage children to write letters to their loved one. I don't read them (unless the child wants me to read it). I find that children open up when writing to their loved one. This seems to help.

I have resources that I use. The ELSA site is fantastic for bereavement stuff to work through. <https://www.elsa-support.co.uk/>

Also websites offering support (see the links on the Southglade website)

When we are not in lockdown, There is the funeral. Children like to know what will happen and they ask me lots of questions. It is advised to be honest, whilst considering what the child can cope with. Right now, with the Coronavirus, it is unlikely that children will go to the funeral. Parents need to help them to understand that this may bring feelings of not being able to say goodbye. Maybe this could be a time to write to their loved one. Plant a tree, or think of some kind of way the child can feel they have been able to say goodbye.

Sometimes, children will need extra support that I can't offer. Parents too. Speak to your GP who will be able to offer family bereavement counselling.

Hope this helps anyone who is in need of some support right now.

Mrs McCarthy