

# Bereavement & Loss Guidance for Schools & Settings

## Section 1: Understanding bereavement and loss

### Introduction

This document aims to explain how staff in schools and settings can support children and young people who have experienced bereavement and loss. It outlines practical advice and signposts sources of support. This document is accompanied by guidance for parents and carers on bereavement and loss.

In the case of a critical incident (i.e. an event which may overwhelm the existing coping resources of the school) please see Local Authority Responding to a Critical Incident Guidance and contact the Educational Psychology Service for further support on 0117 922 2444 or email Senior Educational psychologists [Jenny.maxwell@bristol.gov.uk](mailto:Jenny.maxwell@bristol.gov.uk) or [Anna.sutherland@bristol.gov.uk](mailto:Anna.sutherland@bristol.gov.uk)

### Bereavement in childhood

Child Bereavement UK indicate that one in 29 children aged five to sixteen has experienced the death of a parent or sibling; this equates to a child in every classroom. Many children will also experience other bereavements in childhood - be those of friends or relatives.

Children's responses to bereavement are unique and associated with many factors such as: the nature of their loss, be it sudden or anticipated; familial resources; the child's relationship with the deceased; the child's age and developmental stage; and proximity to the death.

When a parent dies, there is often acute stress within the family which has a marked impact upon child wellbeing (*Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020*). Whilst most children who experience bereavement go on to do well in life (*Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020*), research suggests that almost half of all bereaved children experience difficulties with daily functioning (*Pham et al., 2018*).

Each child and young person will respond to bereavement in their own way however research indicates that children can struggle with emotional responses, family functioning, friendships, academic attainment, engagement, and wellbeing.

## The process of grief

There is no set pattern or time limit to the complex emotions and processes of grief. It is something which everyone will experience in slightly different ways. However, understanding some of the suggested processes can be helpful in understanding grief. While there have been suggestions of linear models (e.g. grief stages), most try to depict the complexity of the process.

Stroebe and Schut's (1995) 'Dual Process Model' is dynamic and shows the bereaved person alternating between "loss-orientation", which focuses on the loss of the person who has died, and "restoration-orientation", which avoids focusing on the loss. Both of these are needed for future adjustment and it is normal to move between the two modes. This is represented visually below:

**Remember**  
Children do not need to 'complete' grief in a staged or sequenced way. They move in and out of different emotions and elements of grief.

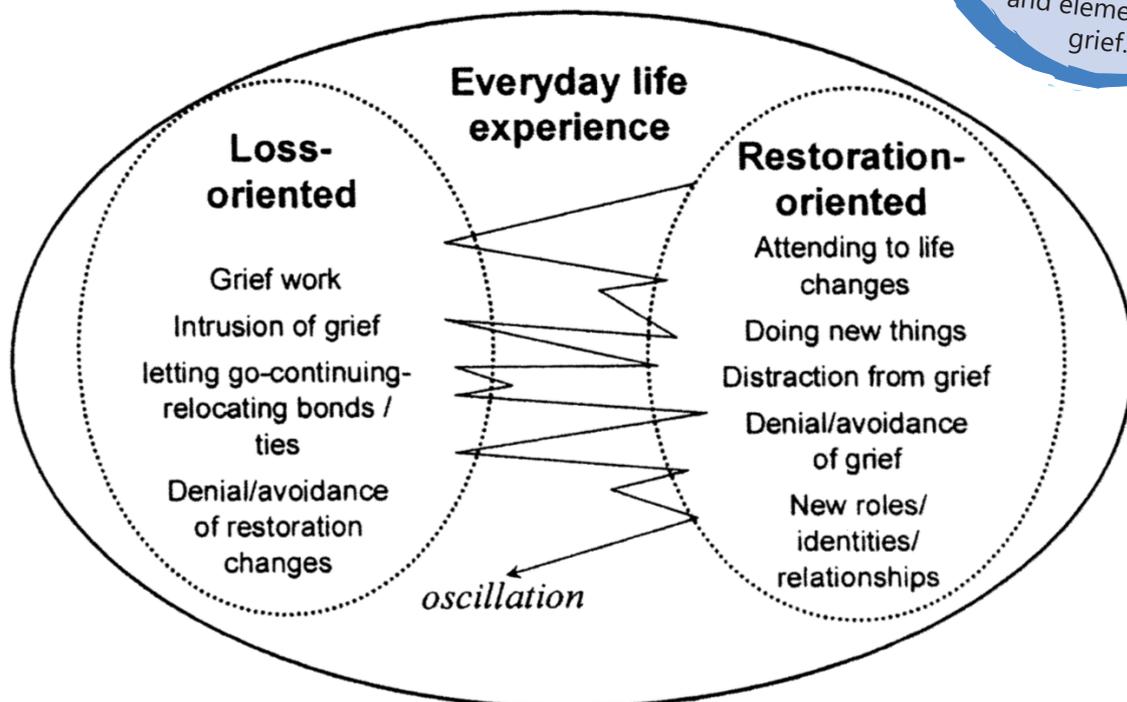


Figure 1. The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement. Source: Stroebe and Schut (1999, p. 213)

Thinking about the Dual-Process Model with regards to children, when children grieve, we might see them 'Puddle Jumping'. This term was introduced by Child Bereavement UK to describe the way that children may move into a puddle full of sad feelings before later moving out and doing something which distracts them.

In a move away from the linear models of grief which lead to detachment, acceptance, or moving on, Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) developed the idea of 'Continuing Bonds'. Klass and colleagues (1996) argue that there is nothing pathological with continuing to experience a bond with the deceased. They argue that healthy grief is not about detaching from the deceased but instead, about building a new relationship with them. They talk about redefining your relationship with the deceased allowing a continued bond to endure. Children - Klass and colleagues (1996) argue – are a good example of the ways in which the bereaved find ways to maintain relationship with a person who has died (e.g. seeing themselves as a legacy of their parent).

**Remember**  
Experiencing a continued attachment to the deceased is not something to worry about. We can continue to experience a bond with people we have lost – children often do this

More recently, Worden (2018) introduced a 'Task-Based Model of Grief' and summarised four tasks which – as part of an active process – bereaved people need to engage with, these were:

1. Accepting the reality of their loss
2. Feeling and processing the pain of their grief
3. Adjusting to a world without the person who has died
4. Maintaining an enduring connection with the person who has died, even when moving forward with their life.

Worden (2008) warned that grief does not fit neatly into boxes and identified many risk and resilience factors which affected the way that individuals experienced grief (e.g. how the person died, the nature of attachment, concurrent stressors etc.)

Tonkin's (1996) model of 'Growing Around Grief' suggests that grief does not lessen over time or become smaller. Instead the person adjusts their lives to accommodate the pain. This in turn leads to the grief being less dominant and all-encompassing in their lives; other people and new experiences help the person to live with the grief, although it is not forgotten. Making new friends, having new experiences are all examples of "growing around grief".

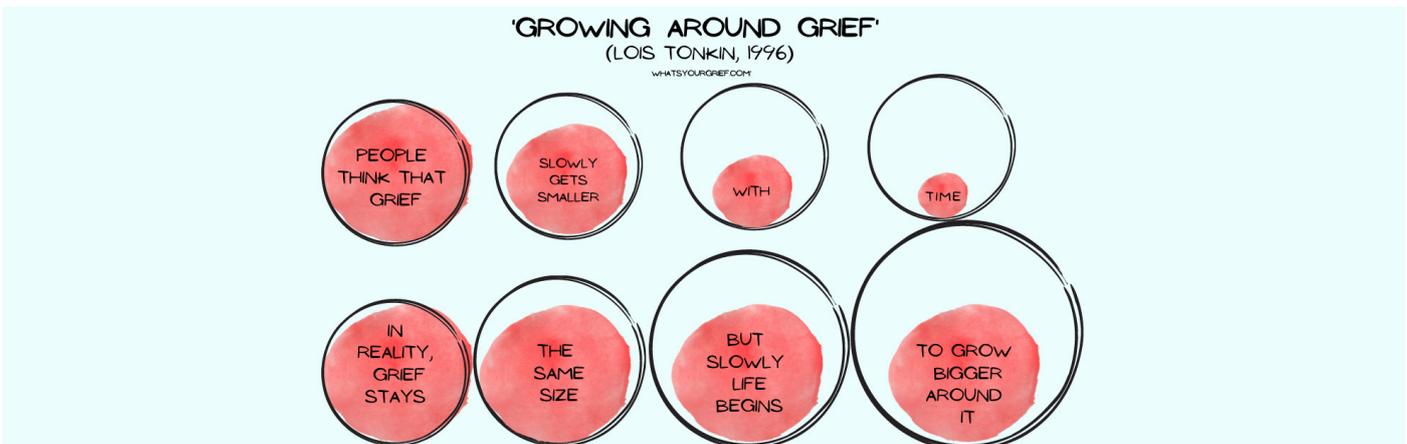


Image source: [www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)

When thinking about loss, we often focus on the loss of the deceased person from the bereaved person's life. However, death is often associated with many **secondary losses** such as loss of:

- **Support systems** – Children may lose practical support from deceased or bereaved family members (e.g. 'Dad's taxi') and/or friends (e.g. walking to school together). They may also lose emotional support, either that which they previously received from the deceased, or that which they previously received from bereaved family and friends who themselves may have less emotional availability through a period of loss.
- **Financial security** – Bereavement can put pressure on familial finances leading to changes in resources, activities, and housing. For children at younger ages, changes to typical activities or resources can be hard to understand.
- **Dreams and future plans** – Many children will have had plans or hopes for the future which will be altered by their loss.
- **Confidence and identity** – Losing relationships with key figures can shake one's self-confidence. Children may lose key figures who championed certain interests or aspects of their identity. Identity is also often related to attachments and relationships. Bereavement can shake a child's sense of who they are (e.g. daughter, sister, best friend).
- **Faith** – Loss can lead people to lose faith in previous belief systems.

No models fully explain the process of grief but they are helpful in recognising that, for children, there may be multiple times when they experience the recurrence of feelings of loss. The process of moving between grief and carrying on with life is normal. Daily 'ups and downs' after a significant loss can be expected for a period of weeks or months.

## Section 2: How children and young people respond to a bereavement and what support might help

### Introduction

Children and young people’s responses to death can vary. Some show outward distress whilst others show very little distress. Some children and young people do not know how to react as they do not fully understand what has happened or may not have experienced a previous loss.

- The way in which children and young people respond to a death is related to their age and developmental stage. Children’s responses will be linked to their functional level of understanding rather than their chronological age and it is important to consider this in thinking about how they may understand the death and how to support them.
- Children and young people’s responses to bereavement are affected by the nature of the relationship they had with the individual who has died.
- The behaviour and attitude of those around them when dealing with the death influences children and young people’s ability to manage and process grief.

**Table 1.** below outlines responses at different ages and stages with support that might help

0-2 years	
Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infants are not able to understand about death but will experience the loss as a separation</li> <li>• They may become withdrawn with increased crying.</li> <li>• The emotional state of people around them can have an impact, so normality and routine are very important.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support soothing through regular physical contact. Being close to adults with heartbeat and motion (e.g. gentle rocking) can support calming.</li> <li>• Be as attuned as possible. Spend time looking at and talking to the infant, smiling as much as possible and being together 1:1.</li> <li>• Try to maintain the infant’s former schedule - normality and routine are important in creating feelings of safety.</li> <li>• In order to provide effective support it is important that parents and carers ensure that they are also caring for themselves.</li> </ul>

## 2-5 years

Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children have a literal understanding of the language used to talk about death and this can lead to misunderstandings (e.g. passed away means someone is coming back).</li> <li>• Death is seen as reversible; there can be magical thinking e.g. if I do X then dad will come back.</li> <li>• Young children struggle to think about time concepts beyond the immediate present – this can make it hard for them to understand the permanence of death.</li> <li>• To make sense of their experiences, children may ask lots of questions, sometimes at inappropriate times (e.g. ‘When will X die?’).</li> <li>• Children may think that something they said or did caused the person to die.</li> <li>• Children are greatly affected by the sadness of family members; this can cause nightmares, sleeping and/or eating disturbances and aggressive or unusual play.</li> <li>• Young children may present as more attention needing and/or more withdrawn.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach words that describe feelings (e.g. ‘sad’ ‘worried’). Label their emotions for them by telling them that you know they are sad. Ensure that they have comfort items to hand.</li> <li>• Provide security by keeping to typical routines as much as possible and explaining who is looking after them.</li> <li>• Spend 1:1 time with them doing things they enjoy.</li> <li>• Use simple, concrete language (e.g. “When people die they do not talk, walk, breathe, eat, think, or feel any more”).</li> <li>• Be prepared to answer lots of questions.</li> <li>• Avoid non-literal terms like “passed over”, “went away”, “gone to sleep”, “or “resting”.</li> <li>• Encourage play as a means to explore loss and bereavement. Use stories to explain more abstract concepts.</li> </ul>

## 6-12 years

Response	Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There can still be misunderstandings at this age, for example: thinking that the person who died may feel things such as sadness, hunger or cold.</li> <li>• There can be lots of questioning as children try to make sense of what has happened.</li> <li>• Children can feel worried about the safety of others and struggle to separate from caregivers (e.g. going to school).</li> <li>• Children want to see death as reversible but are beginning to understand it as final.</li> <li>• Children tend to understand the finality of death at 10-12 years.</li> <li>• They may not understand their own involuntary emotional response to the loss, which might include disturbing feelings of fear and guilt.</li> <li>• Behaviour may include immature reactions, outwardly difficult behaviour or new/ increased fears</li> <li>• Trauma can be associated with racing thoughts or instructive thoughts. In response to this, children may appear distractable or forgetful.</li> <li>• Physical manifestations of emotional pain may also develop e.g. headaches or stomach aches.</li> <li>• Older children are noticing others' feelings and can worry about these. They may try to 'help out' or try very hard to please adults and not worry them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Label and notice emotions.</li> <li>• Allow comforting items or toys to go into school.</li> <li>• Keep to typical routines and ensure that children know what to expect, when.</li> <li>• Use simple, concrete language to explain death as an when required (e.g. "When people die they do not talk, walk, breathe, eat, think, or feel any more").</li> <li>• Avoid non-literal terms like "passed over", "went away", "gone to sleep", "or "resting".</li> <li>• Be prepared to answer lots of questions and discuss misconceptions.</li> <li>• Encourage play as a means to explore loss and bereavement.</li> <li>• Use stories to explain more abstract concepts.</li> <li>• Be prepared for 'puddle jumping' this is where children may move in and out of their grief. At some points they may appear very distressed and at others, they may play as if nothing has occurred.</li> </ul>

## 13-18 years

### Response

- Young people at this age usually have an adult concept of death but their response and emotions may be heightened and very powerful.
- Reactions may include anger, depression and non-compliance and the young person may be unsettled and more withdrawn and/or distractible.
- Trauma is associated with difficulties with attention and focus so school work may be more difficult.
- Teenagers may not want to go to school, finding it hard to separate or to face the school environment.
- The loss may cause children to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings.
- Hiding feelings might include use of jokes, humour or acting as if they do not care.
- There can be an increase in risk-taking behaviour to provide escape or comfort.
- Teenagers can want to turn towards their friends rather than family to seek support.
- Loss can also feel very isolating for adolescents and they may feel a sense of loneliness.

### Support

- Be honest and share information. Keep to typical routines and communicate these.
- Talk with the child about what support would be helpful at school and communicate this to key school staff.
- Acknowledge and label emotions. Provide time and space to discuss strong feelings if they wish to.
- Talk to them about grief, what it is and that everyone feels differently.
- Consider co-creating self-regulating strategies with them (e.g. writing, listening to music, talking to X, reading etc.)

## Supporting children and young people with special educational needs

How any child experiences bereavement will relate to their functional level of understanding. To effectively support children with SEND, begin by exploring how their needs may impact upon their experience and understanding. As a team, consider the ages and stages table above alongside the aspects of thinking below:

Language	Memory	Thought
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do they understand abstract language (e.g. 'sad' 'dead')?</li> <li>• Are they able to ask questions?</li> <li>• Can they understand spoken words and sentences?</li> <li>• Can they use language for reasoning?</li> <li>• Do they understand time concepts (e.g. long time, yesterday, next week)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many concepts can they remember when listening to others?</li> <li>• Will there be key aspects of an event which may be more salient to a child (e.g. specific interests)?</li> <li>• Can the child remember what has happened?</li> <li>• Are they able to recall detailed memories for events?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can they consider multiple aspects of a situation or do they tend to focus on one part (centricity)?</li> <li>• Are they able to understand how other people may be thinking and feeling?</li> <li>• Do they understand what death and dying mean?</li> </ul>

To support children with SEND who are experiencing loss, consider the below:

- Tailor your communication through use of words, sign and visuals (e.g. photos of real objects such as coffins) to explain what has happened. Consider approaches such as Social Stories (Carole Grey) where appropriate.
- Aim for a joined-up approach whereby the communication plan and support arrangements are shared with all supporting adults to promote consistency.
- Teach the concept of death with clear words and real-life examples such as dead flowers or fish. Explore ideas such as burial through use of photos (this can seem macabre but is helpful) and play-based or real-life experiences (e.g. burying deceased fish etc.)
- Be prepared for and allow emotional expression, do not shy away from the loss, this can be confusing and exclusionary. Consider exploring videos or images of the deceased. Show your own emotion and tears, explain clearly why you are sad to aid understanding.
- Remember the deceased through memory boxes, sensory keepsakes (e.g. a piece of clothing), videos or images.

## How to Help Children and Young People Experiencing Bereavement

While every child and young person will respond differently, there are things which you can do to help them to understand what has happened and process their feelings and emotions. The following points may be helpful in supporting children who have experienced bereavement and their peers.

- Keep in touch. Research tells us that help and support is best given by trusted, familiar adults. Simply providing ongoing contact from a member of staff who knows the child can be helpful. Ongoing check ins and support that recognises significant dates should be considered.
- Try to make things as normal as possible. Continue with established routines as much as possible in the current context. Encourage children to engage with usual activities and interests and, if possible, plan phone-call check-ins so there is a sense of the safety that predictability and routine can bring.
- Ask the child what they would like to happen when they return to school. Do they want their classmates to know what has happened? Do they want to tell them themselves? If so, would they like some support to do this? Acknowledge that people will have different preferences as to how they are treated. Some children may want to discuss what has happened, while others may want to be left alone. In general, bereaved students say that they would like others to treat them as before rather than being 'over-nice' to them. However, it is a delicate balance as they don't want people to behave as if nothing has happened at all. You may wish to allow access to a 'quiet room' where he/she can go to be alone and agree a way to communicate this (e.g. signal or exit card).
- Use clear language such as "dead" and "death" rather than what we may perceive as more comforting language such as "gone to sleep" or "loss". These phrases can be confusing for children e.g. saying that someone is lost may cause belief/hope that they can be found. Be honest and open and answer questions as truthfully as you can in a way that children can understand. Stick to known facts. It's okay not to have all the answers and to say that you don't know.
- Be visible and accessible. Create an atmosphere where children know they can talk about their experience of death and that you will listen.
- Normalise feelings. Reassure children that it is okay for them to be upset and help them to find constructive ways of expressing difficult feelings. This might simply involve helping them to find the right words to describe how they are feeling (e.g. through staff modelling emotional literacy). Help them to understand that their behaviours may be as a result of feeling angry because they miss the person who has died and don't understand why it happened. Also remind children that it is still okay to laugh and have fun.
- Look after your own wellbeing and mental health. Dealing with the bereavements of others may bring back memories of your own. Be kind to yourself and ask for help if you need it. It is important that staff are able to come together and support each other.
- Support with friendships Bereaved children and young people can feel that their school friends are withdrawing from them (Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020). We can support children by planning with them what and how they wish to share. Some children may wish to tell close friends themselves, others will want to sit in whilst an adult does this, whereas some may wish for an adult to tell friends on their behalf. When children are able to tell friends or be present when they are told, they can feel more in control of the history and narrative during a difficult time (Dyregrov, Dyregrov & Lytje, 2020). The graphic overleaf may help.

## What can help?

While every child and young person will respond differently, there are things which you can do to help them to understand what has happened, to process their feelings and emotions and, in time, move through the grieving process



## Considering the Family's Views and Wishes

Direct contact with the family may be difficult but an essential early action in establishing the facts around what has happened, allowing you to accurately communicate with the school community. This requires great sensitivity and, at such a distressing time, it is important to identify how much information the family wish to become widely known, enabling you to respect their wishes when addressing children's questions and sharing the news more widely (if appropriate). The family may wish to identify a key point of contact (e.g. a family friend, or relative) who can relay information and communicate on behalf of the immediate family. The family may need time to consider the various options, particularly as they may be distraught, in shock, numb or in denial.

If you are considering any memorial or celebration to channel positivity or provide staff and students with the opportunity to share their grief, this will need to be discussed with the family first. The cultural heritage of the family, traditions and adherence to faith may influence how they would like things to be handled. School staff will need to be particularly sensitive to these matters.

## Considerations when supporting those affected by suicide

Support for those bereaved following a death by suicide should be offered in much the same way as other bereavement support. Whilst families bereaved through suicide will be experiencing grief and sadness, they may also face additional pressures and pain from difficult questions and intrusive public scrutiny, at a time when they are highly vulnerable. In such situations it is especially important to carefully consider a range of additional factors including; accuracy of information, language used, communication and the prevention of unhelpful speculation.

When discussing suicide, be mindful of up-to-date phraseology to avoid language which could be considered stigmatising or blaming.

Instead of Saying	Say
Committed suicide	Died by suicide Took his or her own life Killed him or herself
Failed suicide attempt/ unsuccessful suicide attempt	Aborted suicide attempt (when the person stops themselves) Interrupted suicide attempt (when an outside circumstance stops the individual)

Further support and guidance is available from the Bristol EPS and the organisations listed below:

[www.uk-sobs.org.uk](http://www.uk-sobs.org.uk)

[stepbystep@samaritans.org](mailto:stepbystep@samaritans.org)

## Sources of further Support

### Childline

Telephone: 0800 1111

Website: [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)

A free and confidential, 24-hour helpline for children and young people in distress or danger. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn.

### Child Death Helpline

Telephone: 0800 282 986

Website: [childdeathhelpline.org.uk](http://childdeathhelpline.org.uk)

A free and confidential helpline available Monday to Friday 10am-1pm; Tuesday and Wednesday 1pm-4pm; every evening 7pm-10pm. The helpline provides support to anyone affected by the death of a child of any age from pre-birth to adult, and to promote understanding of the needs of bereaved families.

### Cruse Bereavement Care

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

Website: [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

A free helpline supporting anyone who has been bereaved by death, open Monday to Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), and 8pm on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings. This service is confidential, offering a 1-1 service to clients in their own homes and promotes the wellbeing of bereaved people.

### Hope Again

Telephone: 0808 808 1677

Website: [hopeagain.org.uk](http://hopeagain.org.uk)

This youth bereavement service, run by Cruse, is free and confidential. It is available Monday to Friday, 9:30am - 5pm and is just for children and young people who have been affected by death. Support includes a helpline, website and peer support.

### Winston's Wish

Telephone: 08088 020 021

Website: [winstonswish.org](http://winstonswish.org)

A national helpline for anyone caring for a child coping with the serious illness or death of a family member. They are a leading childhood bereavement charity and the largest provider of services to bereaved children, young people and their families in the UK.

### Kooth

Website: [kooth.com](http://kooth.com)

Free, safe and anonymous online counselling support for young people aged between 10 and 25. Available Monday to Friday 12pm-10pm and Saturday to Sunday 6pm-10pm.

### Childhood Bereavement Network

Website: [childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Childhood Bereavement Network supports professionals working with bereaved children and young people with information updates, key resources and networking opportunities.

### Grief Encounter

Telephone: 0808 802 0111

Website: [griefencounter.org.uk](http://griefencounter.org.uk)

Email: [griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk](mailto:griefftalk@griefencounter.org.uk)

Support for children and families who have been bereaved via phone, online chat and email. You can also take part in group activities with likeminded families at their fundays, grief groups and remembrance days. Phone lines are open Monday to Friday 9am-9pm.

### Compassionate Friends

Telephone: 0345 123 2304

Website: <https://www.tcf.org.uk/>

Email: [helpline@tcf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@tcf.org.uk)

A nationwide support organisation for bereaved parents with a local branch – 53 North St, Bristol, BS3 1EB.

## Samaritans

Telephone: 116 123

Website: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

A registered charity aimed at providing support to anyone in emotional distress, who is struggling to cope or at risk of suicide. They operate across the United Kingdom and Ireland and are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year by telephone, email or post.

## Young Minds Crisis Messenger

Text: Text YM to 85258

24-hour text support for young people experiencing a mental health crisis; texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.

Anna Freud Centre Youth Wellbeing Directory

Website: [annafreud.org](http://annafreud.org)

A list of local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

## Helpful Books for Bereavement Support

Something Bad Happened: A Kid's Guide to Coping with Events in the News by Dawn Huebner (suitable for ages 6-12)

The Day the Sea Went out and Never Came Back by Margot Sunderland (suitable for ages 4-12)

Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley

When Dinosaurs Die by Laurie Krasny-Brown and Marc Brown

Always and Forever by Debi Gliori and Alan Durant

When Someone Very Special Dies by Marge Heegaard (Drawing book suitable for ages 9-12)

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst and Joanne Lew-Vriethoff (suitable for ages 4-7)

Have You Filled A Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids by Carol McCloud

Sad Isn't Bad: A Good-grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing with Loss (Self-help books for kids) by Michaelene Mundy

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: Your Activity Book to Help When Someone Has Died by Diana Crossley

No Matter What by Debi Gliori

When Dad Died by Holins and Tuffrey-Wijne

Where students who have peers with pre-existing health conditions, it may be helpful to read and talk through Goodbye Daisy by Stephanie Nimmo.

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