

HELPING A CHILD THROUGH GRIEF?



Sarah Helton, a child bereavement author and trainer, on the importance of play when trying to help bereaved and grieving children

No one likes to think about death, let alone talk about it and who feels comfortable talking to children about death?

Death, however, is the one guaranteed event in all of our lives and sadly many children experience bereavement and grief at a young age. It is found that one in 29 5-16 year-olds have been bereaved of a parent or sibling – that's a child in every average class. Covid-19 means that this statistic will sadly increase.

Being blessed with life means that we also have to cope with others dying and manage the associated emotions of grief. But how can we help children to manage the enormity of this? How do we help children to understand what has happened and support them with the complex emotions of grief?

An adult's natural (and understandable)



instinct is to try and protect children from all challenging situations and emotions. Death, bereavement and grief are all such topics that we try to shield children from. These are areas that can be very difficult to talk about and as a result often aren't discussed with young children.

What about if we look at things in a different way? From the child's perspective?

Research has shown us that a baby is aware when their mother or father dies. They notice that the touch, sound and smell of their significant caregiver has changed. If a baby senses this then we must remember that all children are affected by a close bereavement. They may not understand the finality of death or the full implications for their future, but they see and feel the changes to their life – both the practical

differences (e.g. someone different taking them to school) and the emotional differences (e.g. the atmosphere of home and the mood of friends and family being different).

Children want to have their loss acknowledged, the opportunity to express their feelings and to be able ask questions. They need to be recognised as a griever.

The key things bereaved children need:

- To know that they are safe and that there are people who care for them
- Be given security, affection and extra reassurance
- Know that the death wasn't their fault
- To have their questions answered
- To be given help to understand the death
- Opportunities to talk in their own time
- Opportunities to be left alone
- To be helped to manage the changes that the bereavement has brought
- To be given the opportunity/a way to say 'goodbye'
- Ways to remember the person
- Continued support and awareness: in the days, weeks, months and years – as long as it takes

GOOD GRIEF ROLE MODELS

Children also need adults to be 'Good Grief Role Models'. We teach children about so many emotions – what happiness, sadness, excitement and anger are. How these feelings affect our lives and how to manage the impact of these emotions. These lessons help children to navigate so much in their lives. So why don't we also teach them the emotions of bereavement, loss and grief?

If children are equipped with these skills and understanding they will be much

better placed to manage difficult situations. We can do this by being a good grief role model: talking to them about how we are feeling after a loss, showing them how we manage these feelings, talking about the person, sharing memories etc.

THE POWER OF PLAY

A child's natural way of learning is through play and exploration. What about if we provided children with ways to learn about difficult situations and process their associated emotions through play?

How can play help children understand bereavement?

- To further help the bereaved families that you work with.
- To support children to understand what has happen and why – the death.
- To prepare children for what will happen

next – the funeral/cremation/burial/ memorial.

- To help prepare children for what will happen in the future – returning to school after a bereavement, moving house etc.
- For many of the children that you work with this will probably be the first bereavement that they've experienced and the first funeral that they will attend. Good Grief Toys can be used to better support children at this difficult time.

No child understands about death or grief after one conversation, they need to revisit the information, ask more questions and explore their associated thoughts and feelings. Toys can be an excellent means for doing this. An adult can use toys to explain to the child what has happened – the death, and what is going to happen – the funeral. The child can then use the toys to revisit these explanations in their own time and slowly begin to process what has taken place.

By playing with toys in this manner allows the bereaved child to explore and 'play out' the difficult events that have occurred and to explore how the future may look – returning to school after a bereavement, an aunty now taking them swimming rather than mum etc. A set of 45 wooden toys, Good Grief Toys is a resource that can facilitate this type of play and in turn help us to provide better support for bereaved and grieving children. ■

Sarah is currently fundraising to provide 10 UK bereavement charities and 10 UK schools to have a set of Good Grief Toys. www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/goodgrietoys

