

# Tips for Parents of Young Children



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## Helping children to cope with bereavement

The death of a parent or close relative is devastating at any age, but grieving the death of mum or dad at a young age is one of the most profound losses a child could face.

Providing the right support to a grieving child can be instrumental in ensuring they continue to thrive and feel positive about their future.



### Here are some helpful tips to follow, for parents or caregivers, seeking to support a grieving child

- **Be honest** – When facing a life-limiting illness, it is always best to be honest with children about what is happening as soon as possible. Where a need is identified, seeking counselling support from a trained specialist can be helpful. Children who participate in counselling before the death of a parent or sibling may need little, if any, additional counselling support in the longer term.
- **Talk it through** – Many people, with good intentions and a desire not to cause further upset, may avoid talking about death with a grieving child. By showing them you care, it will mean a lot. Plus, by doing so you are giving them permission to talk openly about it with you whenever they like. It is important to let them ask questions, listen to their response, and don't be afraid to show your own emotions and talk about how death makes you feel.
- **Keep it simple** – Adults often use words like 'passed away', 'gone' or 'lost' when someone dies, and may avoid using the words 'died' or 'dead' – particularly when speaking to bereaved children. But, generally, children don't have those same concerns and may find those other words more confusing. Similarly, some people create elaborate stories for grieving children to explain where their parent or sibling has gone. Again, this is often far more confusing for children than the truth.

- **Prepare for 'puddle hopping'** – This is a term often used to describe the way children dip in and out of emotions. While adults tend to become immersed in their grief, it is common for bereaved children to be upset one minute and then asking what's for dinner in the next. That is perfectly normal and does not reflect how they have been affected by what has happened. Try approaching discussions about the death of a parent or loved one in a similar, 'puddle-hopping' manner. Encourage children to talk about their memories of the relative, of how they loved them, and then suggest an activity linked to that, such as finding a nice photograph of them, or drawing a picture of a happy time they'd spent together.
- **Create a memory box** – Retaining memories of someone who has died, or who is having end of life care, can be particularly difficult for young children. Encourage them to fill a memory box with things that remind them of that person. They may choose a pebble they collected on a family holiday, or mum's perfume, as well as their favourite pictures of happy times. Not only can they dip into the box and add to it at any time, but it's also a great tool for them to use when they want to talk about that person with someone they trust.
- **Prepare them** – By talking children through what they may see when someone is ill or what a funeral will be like, or by giving them the chance to participate in some way, you can help them express their feelings in a healthy way. For example, if a relative has lost their hair because of the treatment they are having, you could explain that this will probably happen, in advance, and perhaps suggest making something for them to cheer them up. Allowing children to be involved in a funeral service can also be helpful – perhaps choosing a song or something to put in dad's coffin. Where possible, taking children to the churchyard or crematorium beforehand may be helpful, so they are familiar with the surroundings.
- **It's okay to cry** – Many people ask if it's okay to cry in front of a child who is grieving. The answer is generally yes. By showing your emotions, you are showing children it's okay for them to do likewise.
- **Stick to a routine and keep things familiar** – A calm positive parenting style, and maintaining your child's routine as much as possible during difficult times like bereavement – can help children feel more secure. If they have bedtime, then a story and bed at 7pm, stick to it as much as possible. This will help you and your child to feel confident in how the day will start and end and to feel safe in your surroundings.

## Where to get help and support

There are some fantastic resources available to support families and bereaved children through the grieving process. There are story books that have been written specifically to help younger children explore the feelings they have when someone they love dies. These books include illustrations and activities, and can be great conversation starters for families. You'll find some available to buy on-line along with lots of helpful information, guidance support groups and forums for grieving families.

Some examples of places to seek support are: **Winston's Wish** – 08088 020 021  
**Childhood Bereavement UK** – 01494 568 900 **City Hospice** – 029 2052 4150

## Nobody gets it right all the time

It may help to talk things over with family or friends. If you are worried about how you or children are coping talk with your health visitor or GP. Your local Family Information Service will have information about services in your area – contact them on 0300 123 7777.

For more helpful tips on your child's development and on positive parenting techniques, visit: [gov.wales/giveittime](https://gov.wales/giveittime)