



# Supporting children under five years old when someone important has died

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, CARERS AND  
PRE-SCHOOL WORKERS



Grief support for  
children and young people  
in Oxfordshire





SeeSaw is a small, independent Oxfordshire charity founded in 2000 to provide grief support for local children, young people and their families, or those who care for them. We provide advice, information, resources, consultation, training and support for schools and, when appropriate, face-to-face support sessions for children and young people, usually in their own homes. We offer telephone advice and resources to enable family members and professionals to provide the support. Often we help them to find the right words, or to understand that a child's reaction is very normal for their age, or how to think about the situation from a child's point of view.

SeeSaw offers advice and support to parents/carers and nursery/school staff on how to talk to young children about death and dying and what is a 'normal' reaction for their stage of development. Generally, children under five haven't yet reached the stage of development where they understand what death means and the impact the death of someone important will have on their life. Because of this we don't usually offer direct 1:1 work with children of this age, but will always be happy to have a conversation with parents and carers if they have specific concerns about their child.

## Who this booklet is for

The death of someone significant in a young child's life can interrupt the natural attachments that are so important at this stage in the child's development. This, together with the absence of strong memories of their own, can be difficult as the child grows and in later life.

This booklet is for parents, carers and professionals supporting a young child after a death in the family. It will help them to help the child to develop an understanding of what has happened, build resilience and promote long-lasting connections to the person who has died.



## Young children, death and grief

It isn't many years ago that people doubted that children grieve, and especially children under five years old. Today children's reactions to death are much more recognised and instead we ask ourselves how children grieve and what kind of support do they need.

When a parent or main carer has died young children will inevitably react to the absence of the person as well as to a change in familiar routines and sometimes surroundings. The security that they once felt is fragmented and they must learn to negotiate and accept their new environment. Even a very young baby with no vocabulary or understanding of death will express distress from such a loss. The way death is understood will vary enormously between tiny babies and children who are ready to start school. Nevertheless, although children under five generally do not fully understand what it means when someone has died, they will pick up the mood of the adults around them and respond by acting out their feelings, often in behaviour rather than words.

Many young children show through comments they make and questions they ask that their understanding of the word 'dead' is limited.

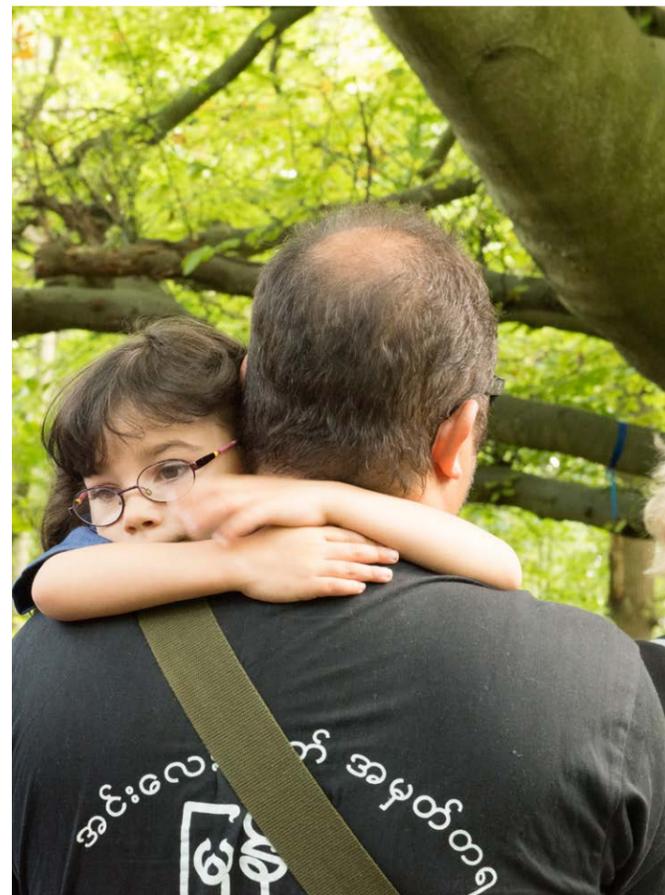
- "Mummy's died, she's gone to heaven, and she's coming back!" (Two year old)
- "Is daddy coming back in a minute?" (Three year old)

Often their questions reflect the matter of fact way in which they receive the information:

- "Are we going to get a new mummy now?" (Four year old)

Other children have only heard of death taking place in a violent way from things they've seen on the television or in online games and may be heard to say: "Who shot him?" (Five year old)

These and other stories emphasise that whatever the circumstances, babies and children under five years old need to be given simple explanations about what has happened and then plenty of reassurance and understanding.



## Understanding how young children grieve

The early years of a child's life are focused on home and family. These formative years are centred on building attachments, in the first instance, to parents or carers. This helps children to feel confident to explore their immediate world and then the world beyond the home. When this pattern is interrupted through the death of a parent or carer it will have a huge impact on the child. Without fully understanding why, the baby, toddler or young child may well respond to this change in the following ways.

### Babies 0–12 months

- Babies react to the sense of loss of the person who cares for them.
- They react to smell and the way they are handled.
- They will notice if once smiling faces at feed times become sad faces.
- They may become more unsettled, affecting sleeping and eating patterns.
- They may become more tearful and clingy.

#### Ways to help:

- keep to as familiar and regular a routine as possible
- avoid passing the baby round to different people, especially at key times like feeding, bathing and bedtime
- babies rely on their senses for comfort and security so use familiar smells, sounds, tastes etc. Wrapping a baby in an article of clothing belonging to the person who has died might bring comfort through its warmth and smell

### Toddlers 1–3 years

- Toddlers will notice the absence of the person who has died without understanding what has happened.
- They may repeatedly ask when the person is coming back as they will not understand the finality of death.
- They will pick up the emotions of the adults around them.
- They may express their emotions through changes in behaviour rather than language.
- They may become more anxious and clingy, especially with strangers or at bedtime.
- They may become more aggressive in play or have more temper tantrums.
- They may show some regressive behaviours; behaving as when they were younger when their world felt a safer place.
- They may ask the same questions over and over again.

#### Ways to help:

- give lots of reassurance, cuddles and understanding
- give simple explanations to questions, repeating what has been said before
- stick to familiar routines and boundaries
- find time to play and relax together



## Young children 3–5 years

- Young children may struggle to understand the meaning of death, especially its finality, while at the same time using the correct language, giving the impression they understand what has happened.
- They may show signs of missing the person but may hop in and out of their sadness.
- They may ask the same questions repeatedly.
- They may be clingy with a remaining carer and not want to engage with less familiar people.
- They may act out in their play what has happened, especially if the death was the result of a car accident or illness, perhaps by playing doctors and nurses.
- They may show some regressive behaviours, behaving as they did when they were younger.
- They may have outbursts of emotions expressed as anger, shouting or tantrums.
- They may show signs of increased anxiety and worries.
- They may think they were the cause of the person dying – through something they said or did or by being told off before the death.

### Ways to help:

- give lots of reassurance, cuddles and understanding
- give clear simple explanations about what happened and be prepared to repeat the information. Encourage family and friends to use the same explanation
- talk about the person who has died, sharing photographs and stories
- try to be available, rather than sending the child to be with other relatives or friends, even if you feel unavailable to the child because of your own grief. They could offer support by being with the child in your home where they are still able to see you
- maintain familiar routines and boundaries
- involve the child in rituals to say goodbye to the person who died, including any funeral
- find time to play and relax together



## Talking to young children about death

Talking to very young children about death and dying is difficult when your natural instinct might be to protect them from such information. Adults often try to soften the information by using words and phrases like 'lost', 'gone to sleep', 'gone', 'passed', 'become a star', all of which add to the young child's confusion.

- "If Nanny is 'lost' why don't we go and look for her?"
- "If Daddy has gone to sleep why don't we wake him up?" Worse still, the child may refuse to go to bed or let other adults go to sleep.
- "If Mummy has 'gone' where has she gone? Why can't she come back?" This may lead to searching activities, watching out of the window, jumping up if someone knocks on the door expecting it to be the return of the person who died.

Children under five understand their world in concrete terms. They will take what they are told very literally. If they are told the dead person is in heaven (a place like any other place they might visit) they may then ask where heaven is, and if they can go and visit the person there. If they are told the person is in the sky they may assume that if they go on an aeroplane they will be able to see the person who has died. If they are told "Daddy has become a star" they will literally believe that is what has happened. It would certainly be less confusing to say something like, "When we look at the stars (even the brightest star) we can remember Daddy and talk about him."

Euphemisms like these are not helpful to young children and can be very confusing. Instead give clear, honest explanations using simple language and in small pieces like a simple jigsaw puzzle.

## Explaining to young children that someone has died

When breaking news to children that someone important has died you might want to begin by saying, "I have something very sad to tell you..."

Although you may want to put off telling a child such a difficult piece of information it's better to tell them as soon as possible. This will avoid the child, however young, hearing about it through conversations with other people or one-sided telephone conversations. It's better if you can tell the child yourself but you may find it helpful to have a friend or member of the family with you for support.

- Find a quiet and comfortable place to break the news, somewhere where you will not be disturbed.

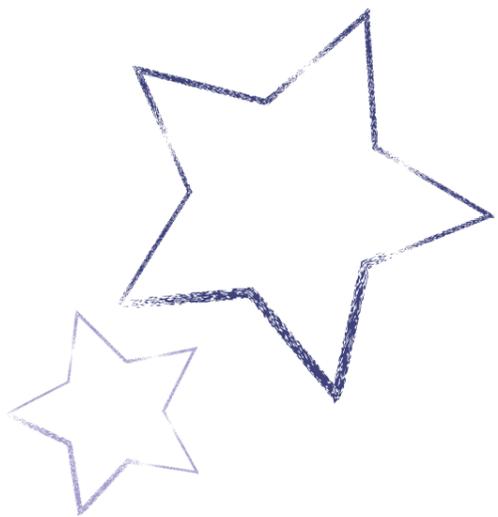
- Allow unhurried time for the child to respond and ask any questions.
- Simply tell the child that the person has died. This may be enough at first.
- Follow the child's lead for more information – if they ask a question they are probably ready for the answer, so again simply reply to the question. Avoid giving too much information or detail.
- Be prepared to follow this up later with further simple explanations or repetition of the information you have already given.

## Supporting young children in the early days after a death

The early days after a death can be a time of disbelief about what has happened, deep sadness, shock and insecurity. Young children will watch and be affected by how the adults around them are reacting. Parents may have less energy for their children and there may be times when they are impatient with them, which can be very confusing for little ones. Seeing parents cry can also be upsetting for young children who may in turn respond very lovingly towards the parent, trying to cuddle and wipe away any tears. Some parents try to hide their emotions in order to protect their child, but children are often best served by simple explanations from the parent that they are upset because they are sad that [.....] has died. This gives the child permission to show their emotion and talk about what has happened. It will also reassure the child that they are not the cause of the sadness.

### In these early days young children can be helped by:

- lots of reassurance, giving an immediate sense of being taken care of
- lots of cuddles to provide security
- avoiding unnecessary separation from their parent/carer, however unavailable you may feel to your child because of your own grief. Separation may increase the child's anxiety about something bad happening to you or someone else
- making space to check out that the child has understood what you have told them and to answer any further questions
- letting the child express what has happened through play and drawing
- creating a simple story appropriate to the child's age. This will help with the repetition of questions toddlers and young children may ask and how they tell other people what has happened:
  - "Do you remember I told you that sadly Mummy had an accident in her car and her body was very badly hurt and she died. That means we can't see Mummy any more, but we will always be able to talk about her."
  - "Do you remember that Daddy had an illness called cancer. The doctors tried to make him better but sadly he died and we can't see him anymore. We will always remember Daddy."



## Explaining to young children what dead means

We often use the word 'dead' with young children in relation to dead insects, animals or flowers so it's a word that they are often familiar with. By looking at the natural world the child will learn to see the difference between things that are dead and alive.

You may also need to explain to the child that when someone dies it means that we won't be able to see them any more, but that we will always remember them. This can often lead to further conversations about where the person is now and what will happen next.

### ★ Book choice: 'Lifetimes' by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

A picture book for little children that explores the beginnings, endings and lifetimes in between of animals, insects and people young and old.



When talking about a person who has died it might be important to give a bit more information about what dead means.

### The following phrases might help:

- when someone dies their body stops working
- they don't feel anything any more like pain, heat or cold
- they don't need to eat or drink anything
- their body is a bit like an empty shell
- all that made the person so very special, like their smile, the little things they did and said, are what we remember, and these things will stay with us forever

★ A book called 'What happens when someone dies' is available free from SeeSaw. This book is to help adults explain to children in simple language and pictures what happens after someone dies. It explores questions about what happens to the body, visiting the chapel of rest, and what a coffin is, as well as how to explain to children about the funeral. In simple words it also helps to explain what happens to the body in a cremation or a burial.

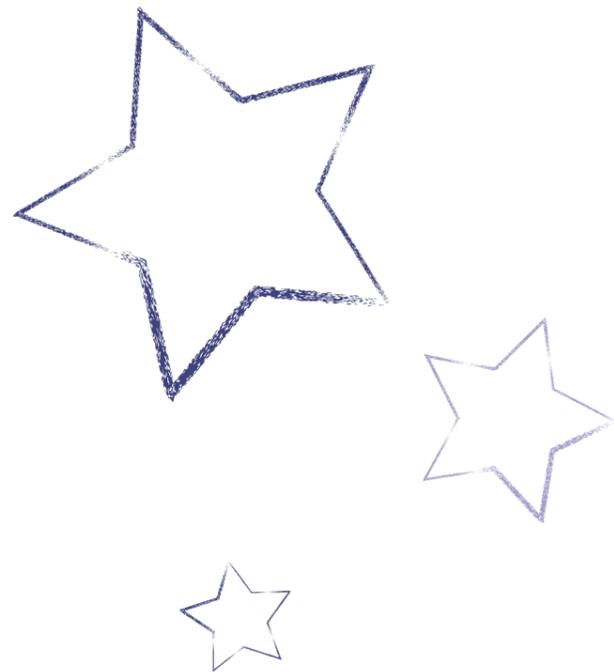
# Explaining to young children about the funeral

Parents and carers often wonder whether or not to take their child to the funeral, and friends and relatives can offer different advice about whether or not it's appropriate. This can make the decision more difficult. There is no right or wrong answer to this: it will depend on knowing your child, your family beliefs and your own grief.

Even very young children can be prepared for what will happen at a funeral. If pre-school children are given enough information and allowed to choose, they will often say they want to attend. It is an opportunity for them to say goodbye to the person who has died and is part of the next stage of coming to terms with what has happened. At the time it may have little significance to the child, but as they get older they may appreciate that they were included.

## Ways of preparing young children to attend the funeral:

- Talk about what will happen at the funeral and explain that it's the time for saying goodbye to the person who has died.
- Involve the child in the preparations for the funeral, perhaps by choosing a song or the colour of the flowers. Children may like to draw a picture to put in or on the coffin.
- Take the child to see where the funeral will take place, or show them a picture.
- Explain that at the funeral some people may be crying because they are very sad, and that some people may also tell funny stories about the person who died, so they may laugh as well.
- Explain to the child what will happen during the day and who might be there.
- Take a bag of quiet toys, books or colouring that the child can play with during the funeral.
- Arrange for someone the child knows well to take them out if they get upset. This will help you if you are overwhelmed by your own grief.
- If you decide not to take the child to the funeral think about other ways for them to say goodbye. This may be visiting a favourite shared place, the grave or memorial. Lighting a candle together or blowing bubbles are other options.



# Family life beyond the funeral

After a funeral there is still a lot for parents and carers to attend to in the midst of their own grief. How adults manage their grief will affect the way children manage theirs, though it's important to remember that a young child's grief will be different. It's easy to assume that children are experiencing the same level of pain and sadness as their parent/carer, but unlike adults children will dip in and out of their grief – one moment being very sad and the next asking what's for dinner or to watch television. Although it's difficult to see a young child struggling with sad feelings there is no magic wand to make it feel better. Reassurance, understanding, talking and time are key to the grief journey for young children.

## What young children need at this time:

- **Physical closeness.** Young children need physical contact to feel safe and secure – gentle rocking, stroking, carrying or cuddling.
- **Respond to children's ongoing questions.** It is by repeating questions that young children will gradually understand what has happened.
- **Provide times of fun.** Grief can be exhausting. Young children need to know that it is ok to have fun and to play and do normal activities. Having fun doesn't mean that they have forgotten the person who died.
- **Talk about feelings.** Help young children to express difficult feelings in safe ways by talking about how they are feeling. Talk about different feelings using pictures or storybooks.
- **Build memories.** Remembering can be healing so offer opportunities to talk about the person who died. Look at photographs together, tell funny stories, and remember special times as well as the difficult ones. Young children may have few memories of the person who died so building a bigger picture of them will be important – things they did when they were little, where they lived, favourite hobbies, foods etc.
- **Believe in the child's ability to recover and grow.** Your hope and faith in their ability to recover may be needed when theirs fails.
- **Taking care of yourself.** How parents and carers model this will be crucial. This is why at SeeSaw we encourage adults to take care of themselves in order to look after their children. Just as on an aeroplane the instruction in the safety briefing is to put on your own air pressure safety mask before fitting your child's, so it is following a bereavement. This might be by seeking your own support through grief counselling with a charity such as Cruse Bereavement Care ([www.oxfordcruse.co.uk](http://www.oxfordcruse.co.uk)).

★ **Book choice: 'I miss you' by Pat Thomas**  
A first look at death for young children.



## Activities for young children

### Remembering

Remembering and talking about the person who has died is an important part of grief and the healing process. Helping your child put together a special memory box will help keep memories alive. The child may not have many memories of their own but by adding photographs and small items that belonged to the person who has died you can help the child build up a bigger picture of them. The memory box can be added to as the child grows and asks more questions.

#### Create a memory box

You will need a box with a lid (it could be a shoe box that your child can cover and decorate). Together gather objects that tell a story about the person who has died and put them in the box.

Here are some ideas of what you might include:

- a scarf or a special brooch or other piece of jewellery
- a special tie or hat
- perfume, soap or aftershave
- photographs of special days out
- favourite music or film
- a toy animal if you liked to go to the zoo or a drawing of the park
- pictures or objects about things they liked doing, e.g. a packet of seeds if they liked gardening or pictures of any hobbies, like a favourite football team, fishing or baking
- pictures your child might have drawn for the person
- cards that have been sent or received for birthdays, Christmas, holiday postcards or sympathy cards
- the order of service from the funeral

The box can include anything that reminds the child of the person who has died. Help your child to be as creative as they can.



★ **Book choice: 'Always and forever'** by Alun Durant and Debi Gliori

A picture book for young children that tells the story of a group of animal friends and their sadness when their friend fox dies. The story explores the sad feelings after death but also how months later they begin to remember all that fox used to do. They realise they will never forget fox but that he will always be in their heart and minds.

## Thinking about feelings

While you may think it's better to hide your emotions from a young child, they will learn about their own emotions through talking about how you are feeling: "I'm feeling sad because I'm missing Daddy."

Using simple feeling words like sad, cross and worried will help them to build a vocabulary of their own to say how they too are feeling. Children can learn that it is ok to express their feelings and that the feelings won't last forever. Toys, books, drawing and play will all help children learn about and express their feelings.

### Exploring feelings

Pre-school children love stickers so find sheets of stickers with emotion faces on them – they are a great way to start conversations about feelings.

Alternatively, with paper and pens draw **feelings faces or emojis** together:



### Make worry dolls from clothes pegs

You will need:

- coloured pre-school craft pegs or plain pegs that you can paint
- coloured wool or thread
- scissors and glue
- marker pens

Wrap the coloured wool or thread around peg about a third of the way down. Fix the wool in place with a small dot of glue. Draw a face on each doll to show a different feeling.



★ **Book choice: 'Silly Billy' by Anthony Browne**

A lovely illustrated story about young Billy who is a bit of a worrier, especially at bedtime. While staying with his granny she tells him about worry dolls and how they can help.

★ We have a list of helpful books that can encourage children to explore what they are experiencing. The booklist offers a range of topics for children of different ages and is available from SeeSaw (see back cover for contact details) or on our website: [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

### Individual photobooks

Little children love looking at photobooks as they are a good way of talking and remembering together. To protect precious photographs make young children their own wipe-clean photo book.

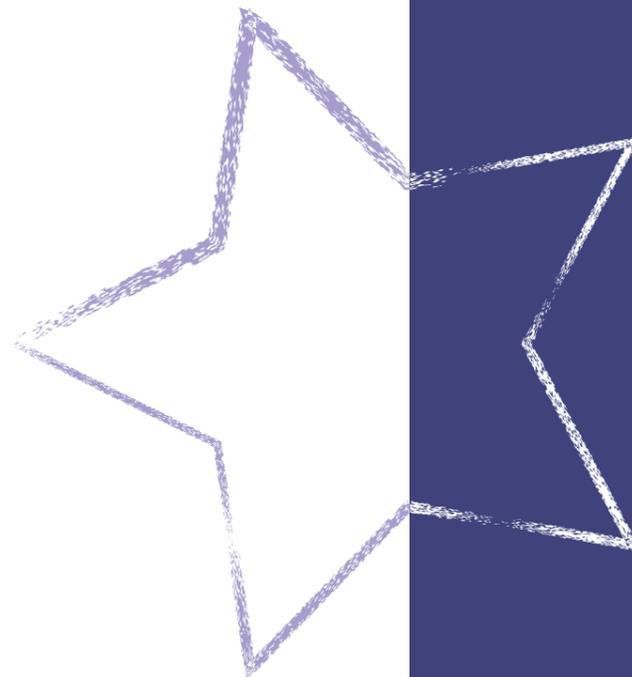
You will need:

- small zip food bags
- coloured card
- photographs
- glue or double-sided tape

Cut card to fit snugly inside the food bags. Stick a photograph to each side of the card.

Repeat until you have about four or five bags. Seal bags and glue, sew or tape the zip edge together to create a book.

*Caution: check all plastic is sealed and tape safely in place*



Seesaw works closely with children and their families to help them learn to live in a world where someone they love has died.

We provide:

- **telephone consultation** with any parent or professional who is concerned about a bereaved child
- **visits to families** to assess their needs and discuss how SeeSaw might be able to help
- **specially trained support workers** who can meet with the child or young person at home to help them explore the impact the bereavement is having on their lives and find ways of coping
- **specialist support** for families and professionals when a parent or sibling is dying
- **group activities** that enable children and young people and families to meet together in a fun and relaxed way
- **information and training** for school staff who are supporting a bereaved child in the classroom or managing a death in the school community
- **training, consultancy and resources** for professionals who work with bereaved children and young people



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