

# FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER

*As I gaze at the snow, And the lights of the tree  
I know in my soul, You are here with me*

## MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT CEO

Dear friends and supporters of FirstLight,

The clocks have changed time and we are coming into the final months of 2022 as I write this short piece. These months can be especially difficult for bereaved persons, big and small. In this edition, we draw attention to the needs of bereaved children. The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) refers to children as the hidden mourners in our society. And there are many. We may be surprised to hear that two in every one hundred 9-year-olds in Ireland have lost a parent and that a large number of children experience bereavement in childhood. The incidence of childhood bereavement must indeed be even greater now as we welcome Ukrainian families displaced by war to our country.

The ICBN of which FirstLight is a member organisation has organised Bereaved Children's Awareness Week, November 14 -18. Events include a number of online webinars targeted at the public and professionals in the lead-up to this Week which are intended to increase understanding of bereaved children's grief, of bereaved children's needs and how we can help. Video resources available on the ICBN's website include: 10 Ways to Support a Child's Grief; Finding your Way through Grief, and an educational video, Children Express Grief Differently. Especially useful is the short video Children Grieve Too, so What can we do, which brings us through in a succinct way the 'TEARS' steps: Talk; Explain; Acknowledge; Reassure and Support. Why not take just one minute to watch this video. Visit the Irish Hospice Foundation channel on YouTube and search Children Grieve too. So, What Can You Do? and learn how you can help to build a compassionate community where bereaved children are supported to express grief.

We are grateful for grant support from Tusla's Children and Young People's Services Committees to help us promote Bereaved Children's Awareness Week and to provide therapeutic support to bereaved siblings.

As we come towards the end of 2022 I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all of the agencies, communities and persons that have enabled FirstLight provide crisis intervention and professional bereavement support services to an increasing number of families across the country. 2021 was an exceptional year, but as of now in 2022, we have supported more families than in the full year, 2021. This would not be possible without the dedication and flexibility of FirstLight's executive team; the professionalism and support provided by FirstLight's talented and caring counsellors and psychotherapists; the insightful guidance and support of FirstLight's Council; and the trust and generosity of FirstLight's many donors and funders. Thank you all most sincerely.

I would like to wish you all a safe and peaceful Christmas

**Yours faithfully, Fionnuala Sheehan, CEO, FirstLight**

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## See Their Need - We Can All Help!

14- 18  
November

**Bereaved  
Children's  
Awareness  
Week**  
Children  
grieve too



Every November, the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) organise a series of events across Ireland to highlight bereaved children's needs and provide a voice for them to be heard. Children are the "hidden mourners" in our society they feel the loss over a lifetime, and in different ways, as they grow and learn to understand the real meaning of death and loss. Every child has different needs, perspectives, and understandings of what death means.

For *Bereaved Children's Awareness Week 2022*, the ICBN is asking people to take one minute to watch a YouTube video titled *Children grieve too. So, what can you do?* To view the video visit the *Irish Hospice Foundation* channel on YouTube and search *Children grieve too. So, what can you do?* We know that all adults can help by understanding and seeing the needs of bereaved children, so please watch and share this short video to help build a compassionate community where bereaved children are supported to express grief.

### **Online Events**

In the lead-up to *Bereaved Children's Awareness Week 2022*, the ICBN will host an array of online webinars targeted at the public and professionals.

### **Supporting Children & Young People with Additional Needs Through Grief**

**Wednesday 9th November, 12.30 - 2 pm**

This online session is aimed at professionals working with children interested in broadening their understanding of children's grief and about the issues involved in supporting children who may have challenges/additional needs with their grief. The format will include inputs identifying the supports that may help, showcasing some projects, and identifying options for future development.

### **Supporting Your Child Through Grief - An Online Evening for Families**

**Monday 14th November, 7:30 pm - 8:30 pm**

This session is aimed at parents and family members supporting children who are experiencing grief to acknowledge that conversations with children about death and dying are hard, sometimes we need guidance and support to deal with the feelings and emotions that arise. We will share information to help parents and family members understand how children and young people grieve and explore some of the common responses and reactions.



# Bereaved Children's Awareness Week

Children  
grieve too

14- 18  
November

## Knowledge & Development sharing in the Bereavement Community - Q&A Session

**Wednesday, November 16th, 12.30 - 2 pm**

This online session is aimed at professionals working with children interested in broadening their understanding of children's grief. The session is planned to acknowledge that as professionals supporting bereaved children and young people we are faced with many different scenarios. We are setting aside this time to create a safe place to share and learn, to unpick some of the challenging cases and scenarios to help support each other in our work with bereaved children. This is an opportunity to share, support, and empower each other to reflect and learn through a Q&A format.

## Working with Bereaved Children - Examples of Practice & Lessons Learned

**Thursday, November 17th, 12.30 - 2 pm**

This online session is aimed at professionals working with children interested in broadening their understanding of children's grief and hearing from bereavement service providers about the issues involved in supporting children with their grief. The format will include inputs from three services highlighting the process, practice & lessons learned from group work with bereaved children and young people.

## Julie Stokes Book Masterclass in conjunction with the UK Children's Bereavement Network

**Tuesday 22nd November, 12 pm -1 pm**

In conjunction with the UK CBN an online session for members with Julie sharing the lessons and learning from her book. You Will Be Okay: Julie Stokes

## How can you get involved with Bereaved Children's Awareness Week 2022?

- Sign up for the online events and encourage others to join in
- Watch and Share 'Children grieve too. So, what can you do?' video on your social media accounts
- Organise a local event and become part of the community supporting bereaved children. Contact [icbn@hospicefoundation.ie](mailto:icbn@hospicefoundation.ie) for a resource pack.
- Host a discussion with your colleagues using Children Express Grief Differently - Educational Resource

**For further details and to register for an online event please visit the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network Website [www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)**



## Understanding Children's Grief



Grief is confusing, hard, lonely, and overwhelming for adults and children. Unfortunately, we cannot fix or reverse what has happened, but we can do our best to help children through the reality of this difficult time in an honest and open manner. It is helpful to understand the way children process grief, and try to support them so that they don't feel that they should be 'over it' within a certain period of time – and more importantly so they don't think something is wrong with them if they feel the loss coming up again and again. Adults can help children understand that this is a normal process of grief, we can't promise things will get back to normal but we can help them learn to live with their 'new normal' without the loved one.

### Age Groups

#### 0 - 2 Years

- Very young children do not understand death but feel the absence of the familiar person.
- They can sense that something has changed, keep routine as normal as much as possible.
- They may show clinginess and distress, and are also likely to withdraw or have outbursts of loud crying and angry tears.

#### 2- 4 Years

- The child does not understand the finality of death and may search for the person.
- They may show signs of regression and irritability sometimes with intensity.
- As adults we need to respond with care and comfort, to help them feel safe. In time they will establish another relationship.

#### 4 - 7 Years

- At this age they are learning language, gaining autonomy and exploring the world.
- They ask very concrete and challenging questions, as they are not clear about the meaning or finality of death. • They can regress and have nightmares or play violent games.
- They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking'
- They may not have words to express their emotions, but we can learn a lot about their thoughts and needs when we observe their play.

#### 7 - 11 Years

- By this age they usually understand the meaning of death so their questions can be more direct and challenging.
- They may worry that other people close to them will die as well.
- Sleep and eating may be disturbed, they may withdraw from friends/normal activities.
- They need their questions answered and they need support in accepting their changing feelings.

### Adolescents

Adolescence is a time of paradoxes, at this age it is normal to rebel against control, but also want direction and structure, often pushing the limits, yet can see limits as a sign of caring. Grief reactions depend on a number of factors including their age, relationship with the person, their personality and previous experiences with death. Grief takes a tremendous amount of energy and can leave students struggling with focus, memory, and completing tasks.





**Sometimes young people don't show any visible reaction at all, but you may see some of the following;**

- May mask fears with rebellion
- Be moody, negative, and anti-social
- Use drugs or drink to numb the pain
- Try to find meaning in their powerlessness
- Struggle to prepare for a future that is uncertain
- Drop out of activities
- Don't always want to talk

#### **When to be concerned:**

- When a child shows persistent anxiety about the loss and it impacts on their day-to-day functioning
- When a child is persistently aggressive
- When a child socially withdraws from friends and activities for a continued length of time
- When a child carries self-blame and guilt about the death
- Self-harming and or suicidal behavior

#### **Families**

Grief is confusing. And while it's completely natural for parents to worry about their children and want to protect them, the best thing is to give them honest, age-appropriate information about a death. Someone who knows the child really well should break the news. Children understand the world through other people; family primarily, but also carers, teachers, extended family, and friends. **Support and information from all these people is vital.** See [www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)

#### **Schools**

When a bereaved child returns to school, it is important that the school climate is supportive and understanding of their needs. Bereavement can impact hugely on the emotional and social well-being of the child, and on their ability to concentrate and conduct their studies. Most grieving pupils do not need a bereavement expert, just the support of people who care. Teachers can make a real difference to bereaved pupils by acknowledging their loss and by offering opportunities for them to talk about their experiences if they want to, and by listening and responding to a pupil's spoken and unspoken messages.

#### **How can I help?**

- Talk – tell them the truth, have open honest conversations using clear language they can understand
- Acknowledge their feelings –and encourage them to ask questions to help them understand and cope with emotions
- Reassure them and be prepared to repeat the information until they can fully get their head around things
- Explain things in a way that they understand no matter how young

**The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) is a hub for those working with bereaved children and young people throughout Ireland.**

#### **The ICBN can:**

- Support professionals in delivering high-quality, appropriate, and accessible bereavement services for children and young people who are bereaved
- Signpost families and carers to a directory of bereavement services available throughout Ireland
- Inform the general public about issues related to childhood loss
- Advocate for bereaved children, young people and their families



# SUPPORTING CHILDREN & TEENS WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER DIES



By The Dougy Center, Portland USA

If you know a child or teen who is grieving the death of a family member, you might be wondering, “What do I say? How can I help?” Here are a few basic principles to keep in mind.

## Access support for yourself

If you are parenting or supporting a grieving child, one of the best ways to help is to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. By accessing support, you model for your children ways to take care of themselves, and you reassure them you will have the energy and presence to be there for them. Think about ways to support your physical, emotional, and mental health. Ideas include: getting quality sleep, eating nourishing food, moving your body, attending a support group, talking with a therapist, connecting with friends, writing/ listening to podcasts, getting outside, setting boundaries (it's okay to say “no”), asking for help, practicing self-compassion, and anything else that works for you.

## Talk openly and honestly about the death

After a death, one of the first questions is: “How and when do I tell my children?” There is no magical ‘right time,’ but in general we recommend telling them as soon as possible, so that they hear it from someone they trust. Start with a short, simple explanation, using words that line up with their developmental level and then let their questions guide what else to share. Avoid euphemisms such as passed away, went to sleep, crossed over, or lost, as they can confuse children. Here are some examples of how to share the news: “Honey, I have really sad news, grandpa died last night. His heart stopped working and the doctors couldn't fix it.” “Grandad died of an illness called cancer.”

## Listen

When a child is grieving, people can be quick to offer advice, give opinions, or try to fix their feelings. What's more helpful is to listen without judging, interpreting, or minimizing. When children trust you will listen and understand, they'll be more likely to come to you when they're hurting or needing advice.

## Be open to different ways of grieving

Grief looks different for everyone. Some children may cry quietly and want to be left alone. Others might have difficulty sitting still or being by themselves. Some children may not outwardly show reactions at all, or their grief comes out as over-performing and striving. You can help by letting them know that all of their thoughts, feelings, and reactions are okay, as long as their behavior does not hurt themselves or anyone else.

## Provide consistency and routine

Life is often in upheaval after a death, so finding ways to create safety and predictability is helpful. Children might also need flexibility, so avoid being rigid about routines. Since you are likely also grieving, reassure children that no matter what, someone will be there to help with cooking, homework, chores, and other daily routines.



**Offer choices**

Children appreciate being able to make choices as much as adults do. Allowing them to make choices in grief can help re-establish a sense of power, control, and trust. These choices can be simple and everyday such as, "Do you want to wear your red or purple t-shirt?" They can also be more complex, such as participating in the memorial service or sorting through the person's belongings. Providing informed choices helps them know they're valued and an important part of the family.

**Get creative**

While some children will talk about their experiences, many will express themselves through art, writing, music, or creative play. You can offer ideas such as making a card for the person who died, creating a collage of pictures, or writing a letter, but be open to their ideas too. Some children are drawn to physical activity so create time and space for them to engage in big energy play like running outside, sports, and messy creative projects.

**Talk about and remember the person who died**

Talking about and remembering the person who died can be an important part of processing grief. You might say, "Your grandmother Rosa really liked this song," or, "Your Uncle Tom made the best steak and chips I've ever had." By sharing stories, you give children permission to share their feelings and memories. If talking about the person sparks emotions and tears for you, you don't have to hide them from your children, but it's helpful to reassure them they didn't do or say anything to cause those emotions. "Sometimes I cry when I think about Nana, but I'm okay. Later I'm going to listen to my favorite song because it helps me feel better."

## Christmas After the Death of A Child



While the first Christmas is particularly poignant, each Christmas without the child who has died will have its own challenges. It is important that parents suffering the loss of their child remind themselves they are grieving and are gentle with themselves.

**Be kind to yourself:** Go slow. You don't have to do the things you don't want to do. Do what's best for you. Don't take on the Christmas dinner and the presents and so on if you don't feel like it. Be kind to yourself.

**Do whatever works:** Parents who have lost a child shouldn't feel guilty for living life, bereaved parents often think they shouldn't be laughing because my child died ... but you have to experience these things. If you repress them, then it makes you angry and you lose those moments of joy. It changes who you are and who you can be.

**Keep the memory.** One of a bereaved parent's biggest fears is that their child will be forgotten. Parents want to hear stories about their child, have other people share photos of their child, and know others are thinking about their child. These stories and photos are meaningful gifts for those who are grieving.

**Family and friends:** It's not about you. Avoid relating to the death by recalling a personal experience. That makes the bereaved parent feel like they should comfort you. Also, it's not the same.

**Trust yourself.** It's OK to have difficult days. They can come when you least expect it. Grief is individualised. There is no right or wrong way to experience it. Allow yourself to feel those feelings and have those days. Everyone else being happy doesn't mean you have to be.



## FirstLight Christmas Cards Available Online



- 1 Pack of 12 Cards €15 (incl p&p)
- 2 Packs of 12 Cards €24 (incl p&p)
- 3 Packs of 12 Cards €35 (incl p&p)
- 4 Packs of 12 Cards €45 (incl p&p)
- 5 Packs of 12 Cards €55 (incl. p&p)

To purchase your 12 Pack of FirstLight Christmas cards visit [www.firstlight.ie](http://www.firstlight.ie)

## Please Nominate FirstLight for Tesco Community Fund



The Tesco Community Fund was launched in July 2014 to support local good causes in the communities around each of its 152 stores throughout Ireland. Every 12 weeks, each Tesco store donates up to €2,000 between three local good causes in the community.

This coming November and December we are asking where possible you consider nominating FirstLight at your local Tesco Store.

The application takes just 3 minutes to complete online at [www.Tesco.ie](http://www.Tesco.ie) and just search Tesco Community Fund Application.

## Join Our Fundraising Committee

Do you have Fundraising or Digital Marketing Experience?

The FirstLight Fundraising Committee needs your skills and expertise

Email: [andrew@firstlight.ie](mailto:andrew@firstlight.ie)



To submit Referrals visit [www.firstlight.ie](http://www.firstlight.ie)

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