

FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER

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Bereaved Children's Awareness Week

Children
grieve too

13-17 November 2023

Dear Friends,

These longer, darker and colder evenings are often more difficult and challenging when we are living with grief and bereavement. Our thoughts are with everyone for whom loss is very present right now.

November 13th-17th is a week when we particularly focus on the grieving and bereavement that children and young people are experiencing. As members of the Irish Children's Bereavement Network, this FirstLight newsletter will be sharing information on the events being hosted by the Network members around the country this week. We are also sharing some guidance and information for carers of children and young people and hope this will support you as you support them.

No matter whether it's a family member or a friend who has died, each child and young person will grieve differently, and there is no right or wrong way for them to feel when they are bereaved. Their feelings will depend on the relationship they had with that person, not just their relationship to them.

Children and young people grieve just as much as adults, but they will express it in different ways. They learn how to grieve and live with their loss by copying the responses of the adults around them and rely on their carers to provide them with the support they need in their grief. It is important for carers to also mind themselves in these difficult times, seek their own supports and to be compassionate to themselves as well as to their children and young people.

We know that as difficult as it can be to witness and be with, expressing grief is healthy and trying to avoid these feelings can cause problems in the future. If you feel your child or young person needs additional supports or you need advice or support to help them, please check the [Irish Childhood Bereavement Network](#) for more information or visit [FirstLight.ie](#)

Sincerely Yours
Jennifer McCarthy Flynn
CEO, FirstLight

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What is the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN)?

The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network (ICBN) is a hub for those working with bereaved children and young people throughout Ireland. One of the main aims of the ICBN is to advocate for bereaved children, young people and their families. It supports professionals in delivering high-quality, appropriate and accessible bereavement services for children and young people who are bereaved. It also helps to signpost families and carers to a directory of bereavement services available throughout Ireland, and informs the general public about issues related to childhood loss.

What is Bereaved Children's Awareness Week?

Every November, the ICBN organises a series of events across Ireland to highlight bereaved children's needs and provide a voice for them to be heard. This year, from November 13th to 17th, the ICBN will be hosting a number of webinars for professionals exploring a range of issues facing bereaved children and highlighting ways for adults to provide appropriate compassionate support. There will also be online support sessions for parents and carers, as well as a media campaign and a range of local and regional events delivered by members and friends of ICBN.

Children are not immune from the impact of bereavement. The 'Growing up in Ireland' study from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) estimates between 4% and 5% of children will be bereaved of a parent by 18 years of age. It also showed that 2.2% of 9-year-olds had lost a parent, 1% a sibling and 28% had experienced the death of a grandparent.

Most children can manage and incorporate the grief they experience into their lives with the appropriate support from their family and key adults in their lives. However, this is based on the premise that the adults surrounding the child have accurate and up-to-date information on the impact of childhood bereavement, something which the ICBN aims to provide throughout the year, but particularly during Bereaved Children's Awareness Week.

Some families may not be able to provide this support if the bereavement has impacted them in a way that does not allow them to have sufficient resources to provide that support. In particular, when a death occurs that is sudden and unexpected, or is complicated by factors that are hard for the adults and children in this situation, extra support will be needed. A smaller proportion of bereaved children will be regarded as especially vulnerable and requiring clinical intervention to facilitate their adjustment to the loss. Adolescents in particular are more at risk of developing some degree of mental health problem following the death of a close family member. Acknowledging and providing appropriate support to bereaved children and their families has a positive effect on their wellbeing and health. To find out more about what supports are available, please visit www.childhoodbereavement.ie.



 **The Irish Childhood
Bereavement Network**

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BEREAVED CHILDREN'S AWARENESS WEEK EVENTS

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The ICBN will host an array of online webinars in November for families, carers and professionals. All webinars are free but registration is required.

Tuesday November 14th, 3.30pm - 4.30pm

An Intercultural Conversation About What We Learn To Do With Grief

Hosted by Barnardos Children's Bereavement Services

The theme of this webinar is the importance of culturally sensitive bereavement support. It will be a conversation between women who were born outside of Ireland and who are living and working in Ireland as they share what they learned about grief and grieving while growing up in Turkey, Zimbabwe, Colombia, Ukraine and the US, along with other countries and cultures they have lived in along the way.

Tuesday November 21st, 7.30pm - 9.00pm

Supporting Bereaved Children: An Open Evening for Parents & Carers

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 feeling and emotions that arise.

Tuesday November 28th, 4.00pm - 5.00pm

Teachers Supporting Bereaved Children

This session is aimed at teachers and will include an introduction to the work of ICBN, an overview of childhood bereavement and the Bereavement Care Pyramid, children's reactions to loss/grief, suggestions for support within schools and sharing resources and links for signposting.

To find out more about the events listed above, and to access additional online supports including the ICBN's catalogue of video resources, please visit www.childhoodbereavement.ie



HOW TO SUPPORT BEREAVED CHILDREN

The ICBN website provides a wealth of resources related to supporting children who are grieving. We are sharing some of their articles below, but check out their website for more - www.childhoodbereavement.ie

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 from all these people is vital.

Children process information by age and stage. How they grieve varies depending on their personality, age and level of understanding of death, but all children need clear information. Use words they understand, and be honest and reassuring. Children experience 'puddle grief': they tend not to be sad all the time, instead they dip in and out, getting diverted by playing with friends, or doing routine things such as going to school.

Factors to consider in a child's reactions to bereavement:

- Who has died?
- How did they die?
- What was the child's relationship with the deceased?
- How do the family express feelings and communicate?
- What else is going on in their life?
- What supports are available in the family, and among friends and community?

Children feel the loss over a lifetime, and in different ways: as they grow and learn to understand the real meaning of death and loss; as they revisit their grief, especially around milestones such as anniversaries, Christmas etc.

How can families and friends show their support?

- Acknowledge that the loss is important, and that it matters.
- Listen to their thoughts, feelings and opinions. Let them know it is fine to ask questions.
- Give age-appropriate information.
- Maintain day-to-day routine as much as possible.
- If things have to change, include the child in decisions, explain the changes and reassure them.
- If they want to, let the child take part in the goodbye rituals.
- Make sure they need to know it's okay not to be sad all the time.
- Give them time to show their feelings, even anger, which can be an expression of deep hurt and unfairness.
- Let them talk about their relationship with the person who has died.
- As the child matures, they may need new 'explanations', which can involve revisiting the loss and what it means.
- They need to know that they are not to blame; anything they thought or said did not cause the death.
- With sudden deaths, where there is no opportunity to say goodbye, they may be angry or act out in protest.
- Meeting other bereaved children can help them see that they are not alone.
- Help them develop coping strategies and resilience to live with loss.
- Reassure them that they are loved, and that they will be cared for no matter how difficult grief is for the family.

Children and Grief by Age & Stage

How children understand and react to grief depends on their age and stage of development. Grief is a heavy burden for a child to carry continually, so they need to put it down sometimes. Grief changes as children get older. As they grow and mature, their understanding of death increases, and they may need to revisit their grief again over the years. It can often be surprising for adults that children are talking or upset about a loss that happened perhaps years earlier when the child was much younger. It is very natural for them to try to understand the loss when they have developed a better ability to do so. When you realise what your child's understanding of death is, you can help them.

Children's Understanding of Death

0-2 Years

After a death in the family it is common for a baby or toddler to become withdrawn or display outbursts of loud crying.

and angry tears. Although infants do not understand death, they know when things have changed, and may react to a person's absence. This may show in clinginess and distress. Support them by maintaining the child's routine and making them feel secure.

2-5 Years

The child still does not fully understand death. They don't realise death is permanent and will happen to everyone. It's important they know that the deceased is not simply 'asleep', and that they will not return. They may worry that something they said or did have caused the death, and need to be reassured that it wasn't their fault. Children often ask the same questions over and over again. Support the child by encouraging them to ask questions, and answering them openly and simply.

5-8 Years

Children gradually learn that death is final and that all people will die at some time. This may make them worry that other people close to them will also die. It can help children to talk about these fears. We can't promise children that no one will ever die, but we can help them to feel safe by telling them that they will always be looked after. More curious children in this age group often ask direct questions about what has happened to the body as they are trying to understand. They may blame themselves in some way for the death and can engage in 'magical thinking'; filling the gaps when information has not been given to them. Support the child by encouraging them to talk about and express their feelings, no matter what those feelings are.

8-12 Years

This age group understands that death is irreversible, universal, and has a cause. Grief can express itself through physical aches and pains and challenging behaviour. It is important not to place unnecessary responsibility on children of this age; particularly eldest children who may feel responsible for younger siblings, or boys who lose their father and take on the role of 'man of the house'. Support the child by reassuring them about changes in lifestyle (such as household income and the family home).

A message from FirstLight Clinical Manager Elaine Masterson, about supporting children who are grieving

From the moment our children are born, we innately respond to and nurture their needs and feelings. We soothe our crying infant, kiss our child's sore knees better after they fall, and cuddle them as they cry when upset. In turn, they respond by feeling better, and their particular dilemma disappears.

In grief, however, our magical kisses and cuddles offer comfort, but the dilemma of grief is prolonged, more like a marathon race of resilience and persistence rather than a sprint. You may be experiencing your own grief, and this is further compounded by the feelings of disempowerment as you are unable to protect and immediately comfort/repair the pain of your child in their journeying through grief.

This common experience changes the dynamics and normal ways we function as a family, adding to the complexities



of family grief and a forever change for your family system as each family member grieves uniquely. These additional changes can be particularly scary for children, as all of what they know is no more.

Well-meaning, parents will naturally want to fix their children's grief and heal their pain. However, the process of grief cannot be prevented, and children must be afforded the space, patience and support to grieve in their own way and at their own pace. This can be challenging if you are also trying to cope with your own grief. Yet, children's own immature neural development requires a loan of our adult advanced understanding of death, grief and the modelling of emotional management. As parents we normalise and model appropriate expressions of grief. Importantly, at times, as parents, we must create our own private space and avail of resources to support our own need to grieve.

An important message children need from parents is permission to engage in grief. Part of grief is to protest; protest their willingness to accept the loss of their sibling, protest to accept the changes in how their family operates, and protest to engage in life's norms as they did before their loss. This protest and fight for autonomy is their only subconscious strategy to cope in a world where they have no control over their loss, the relational changes within their family unit, and how others in their outside world see and treat them differently since their loss.

Adolescence

Adolescence is a time of huge change. These years are marked by rapid physical, cognitive, emotional and social transition. Teenagers are looking for increased autonomy from family and home, for greater independence, and for new experiences. They are developing their personal value system while progressively forming their unique identity. Adolescents struggle with the paradoxes of their lives: striving for closeness yet fearing intimacy; lacking in autonomy yet expected to act maturely. The most frequent deaths experienced by adolescents are those of parents, siblings or peers. Bereavement forces them to rethink their world; how they view themselves, others, and life as a whole, and can evoke an intense grief response. The response will depend on their age, the nature of the death, their relationship with the deceased, each individual personality, how the family grieves, and the changes the death creates within the family. There is a marked difference in the grieving styles of early adolescents (12-14 years) and late adolescents (15-18 years).

Early Adolescence (12-14 years)

- In early adolescence, cognitive change is in initial development of formal operational abilities.
- Psychological change involves the withdrawal of emotional investment in the parent.
- Social change highlights the importance of peer relationships for teenagers.
- Puberty causes biological change.

This combination of factors makes adolescence a very complex transitional age. Due to formal operational thinking and a changing need for information, early teens may show a diminished interest in, and an active avoidance of information about, a parent or sibling's illness or treatment. The change in their emotional relationship with parents is complicated by a parent's serious illness. They are caught in the need to distance and the longing for closeness. They want privacy as they develop their own identity. Younger teens may talk with friends more readily than with their parents. This need changes in late adolescence. They do not like to be seen as different as they fear being rejected by their peers. Some friends may shy away. Avoidance of feelings is common at this stage. They experience muted anticipatory grief.

Typical reactions:

- Drop in school grades.
- Sleep problems.
- Anger.
- Sadness.
- Withdrawal from discussions about the parent's condition.

Behaviours to watch out for:

- Oppositional.
- Argumentative.

- Demanding behaviour.
- At times of intense anxiety, teenagers may want to co-sleep with a parent. If this extends over a longer time span it can indicate more serious problems.
- Extra demand of chores at home may interfere with their time with friends, which can cause resentment.
- They can become highly anxious and preoccupied with how to manage their emotions. An attempt to hold emotions in and not show upset is common.
- They need a final communication with the parent or sibling who is dying.
- Adolescents who are informed and prepared for a death can feel more in control of what is happening, which can help in grieving afterwards.
- Adolescents like to be part of the funeral planning and rituals, and have a need for such inclusion.
- Many have definite opinions about how they want to engage in these rituals.
- Some feel oppressed by the crowds at the funeral and long for time with a parent.
- Adolescents often cry alone as they do not want to upset a parent, and if they see the parent upset they will often leave the room.
- If the loss is of a parent, the adolescent has to develop a new relationship with their dead parent in their memory, while negotiating a new relationship with the surviving parent.
- Adolescent's mourning is generally episodic, often triggered by specific events such as birthdays or anniversaries.
- They may show resistance to talking as they are more preoccupied by school and peers.
- They often talk with adults other than their parents about their experience of loss.
- Parents often find it difficult to enter their teen's experience of loss.
- Such teens may be more angry and tearful about difficulties in school or homework than about the death.
- Some may be more expressive – these tend to come from families that foster open communication of emotions.
- Reminders such as birthdays and holidays are important.
- The surviving parent's mourning can feel threatening to many adolescents because the parent appears more distraught than they had previously seen.
- Wearing a dead parent's clothes is not uncommon as a way of identifying with them.
- Bereaved teenagers often discuss talking with their dead parent, dreaming about them, and feeling their presence
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- It is important for them to express the specific meaning this loss has for them. For example, a father may have been a mentor and friend who promoted independence. Others mourn the loss of a confidante.
- They require help in setting limits on potentially destructive regressive behaviours, acting out aggressively, or with drugs and sex.

Late Adolescence (15-18 years)

- Mourning takes place in a more adult manner.
- A complex mourning process, teens automatically think about and integrate their past relationship to the parent who has died, what the parent expected of them, and how they might live up to those expectations.
- More advanced cognitive abilities means more painful grief, as this age group can understand the enduring consequences of the loss.
- Anticipatory mourning is experienced first, followed by more persistent and prolonged periods of mourning after the death.
- At this stage, they have the ability to see the situation from another person's perspective.
- They develop deeper personal relationships
- They are in the process of planning for their own future.

Gender differences:

- Girls emphasise the change in relationship with their mothers. Boys are usually engaged in more fully separating from both parents.
- For girls, a parent's death interferes profoundly with their developmental task of changing their relationship with the surviving parent. Rather than only withdrawing emotional investment from the relationship, they now have to renegotiate their relationship with the deceased parent and the surviving partner.



Reactions in bereaved adolescents may include:

- Masking their fears with rebellion, by acting out their protest at what has happened.
- Exaggerating their maturity in order to mask an inability to cope.
- Being moody, negative and rebellious, and feeling life has become very unfair.
- Using drugs or drink to numb the pain.
- Expressing blame at anyone they feel might be responsible for the death.
- Become disconnected; dropping out of activities or losing enthusiasm for them.
- Feeling powerless over what has occurred and trying to find some meaning from it.
- Struggling to prepare for what now feels like an uncertain future.
- Feeling different from their peers.
- Not always wanting to talk.
- Using sport as a release.
- Looking for excuses to try, such as watching sad movies or read books on loss.

How you can help:

- Be present for them.
- Listen to them – and hear what is not being said.
- Give the teen time to unfold their struggles.
- Is there another adult who can support them? Teens may want to protect a parent from their pain, and talk to someone else.
- Be patient; don't react to their responses to loss.

Adolescents need extra help if they:

- Deny the death has occurred.
- Suffer panic, anxiety or fear which interferes with their day-to-day life.
- Suffer physical ailments that continue without identifiable medical cause(s).
- Have prolonged feelings of guilt or responsibility for the death.
- Have chronic depression.
- Display chronic anger or hostility.
- Display behaviour that is reckless and life-endangering to self or others.
- Demonstrate prolonged changes in personality, personal appearance and/or behaviour.
- Withdraw consistently from friends, family members or prior interests.
- Show prolonged changes in sleeping patterns.
- Have continuing problems with eating (such as overeating, under-eating or binging).
- Abuse drugs or alcohol.
- Are sexually promiscuous.
- Self-harm.
- Have suicidal thoughts or actions.



The First Steps in Talking to Children about Grief

Naturally we want to shield children from pain. Giving a child difficult news about a death or serious illness is not easy at a time when you can be overwhelmed by grief yourself. It's normal to be unsure about what to say, and how to find the words your child can understand.

Conversations about death are steps in a journey. Once you tell a child about a death or serious illness, you will need to have ongoing conversations as the child takes in and processes the information. The importance of support from family, friends and care settings (such as crèche or school) cannot be underestimated – much of children's understanding of the world comes through family and the significant adults in their lives.

Children grieve in different ways depending on their personality, age and their understanding of death. Children need information and explanations in order to make some sense of what has happened. Be honest and talk in language that children understand. Information and reassurance help a child make sense of a loss.

Talking to children about suicide

This is often considered one of the most difficult conversations to have. However, it is better a child hears it from a parent or someone in their immediate family circle rather than indirectly. How much information you give depends on the child's age and personality. Suicide can be explained in stages, in the first instance you might explain that the person has died, and then there may be details of when and where, and that the person caused themselves to die because in their mind living had become too hard for them. Be aware of the shock factor. Repeat key information later. Check with them as to what they have understood.

The child may be angry and frustrated and have questions you can't answer, and you may have to explain that you don't have all the answers. Very often children imagine that they caused the person to die, and with suicide children worry that they could have done something to prevent it. Reassure them that this is not the case.

When Does a Child Need Professional Help?

Usually, natural support networks such as friends, family, school and community can provide the support to help a child deal with the death of someone close. However, sometimes, children need to talk to a professional. Some key behaviours indicate this:

- Persistent anxiety.
- Persistent yearning/longing for the deceased.
- On-going aggression.
- Social withdrawal, lack of interest in friends and activities.
- Self-blame or guilt about the death, believing they were at fault through something they said, have done or thought.
- Self-destructive behaviour, hurting themselves, or expressing a desire to die or to be with the person who has died is a good indicator that professional support is needed.

Such behaviours indicate complicated grieving, which requires specialised intervention. If you are concerned about your child, seek support from your GP, a member of the hospital or a hospice team.

If your child is grieving the loss of a sibling who was aged 0-18, you can submit a referral to FirstLight at www.firstlight.ie.

Submit Referrals @ www.firstlight.ie

Carmichael Centre, 4 North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Phone: 01-8732711: Website: www.firstlight.ie: Charity No. CHY7716

If you have a newsletter query or a story for inclusion in the newsletter please email info@firstlight.ie