

FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER

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Bereaved Children's Awareness Week

Children
grieve too

18th - 22nd November 2024

As a member of the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network, FirstLight is very glad to be able to support the national campaign, Bereaved Children's Awareness Week 2024 which will take place from Monday 18th November to Friday 22nd November. This special newsletter is dedicated to sharing the resources, workshops, and community activities that are being run all over the country with the aim of helping families and communities to understand the grieving process in children and offer practical tools to support them.

Losing someone close at a young age can have a profound impact on a child's emotional and mental health, and the week seeks to support the development of an open, supportive environment where children can express their feelings and find comfort. Grief is complex and often confusing. Parents, guardians and all of us who have young people in our lives can sometimes struggle to know how to best respond and support the children we care for who have been impacted by bereavement and loss. We know that most children will cope and learn to live with their grief when the important adults in their lives can support them well and this week, and our newsletter will highlight and share the information and resources you may need at an often difficult time. You will also find information to help you if a child or young person needs professional support with the loss they are experiencing.

Please also remember to take care of yourself as you support a child or young person. It can be very easy to set aside our own grief and loss when we feel responsible to care for others. It's natural to want to focus on a child's needs, but it is important to tend to your own emotional well-being. Taking time to care for yourself is essential not only for your own healing but also for being able to offer the steady presence your child needs. Children will look to the adults in their lives to understand how to feel and respond to grief and it is okay to show a child that you are grieving, this can help them understand that grieving is natural and healthy.

Sincerely Yours,

Jennifer McCarthy Flynn
CEO, FirstLight

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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 awareness-raising events across Ireland to highlight bereaved children's needs and provide a voice for them to be heard. This year, from the 18th -22nd November, the ICBN will host several 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.

Why is this Campaign Important?

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.

BEREAVED CHILDREN'S AWARENESS WEEK EVENTS

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Join us online...

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

Exploring Safe Harbour – Supporting Children Bereaved By Suicide

Friday, November 22nd, 12.30pm - 2pm

This webinar will explore Safe Harbour, an illustrated storybook for children who have been bereaved by suicide. Safe Harbour has been developed by bereavement experts - including professionals and people with lived experience – to help a child with their grief by encouraging conversation and developing their understanding of death and suicide. The aim of the webinar is to increase insight into some of the factors at play in children's grief responses to suicide, and to deepen understanding of families lived experience of suicide bereavement.

A Health Promoting Approach to Children's Bereavement Support

Tuesday, November 26th, 12pm - 1pm

This webinar introduces a holistic approach to supporting children through grief, focusing on promoting emotional well-being, resilience, and social connection. It emphasises the creation of safe, supportive environments that foster healthy emotional expression and overall development. The session will also explore how brain development affects a child's understanding and experience of grief, shaping emotional responses and coping mechanisms.

Supporting Bereaved Children: An Open Evening for Parents & Carers

Tuesday, November 26th, 7.30pm - 9pm

This session is aimed at parents, carers, and family members supporting children who are experiencing grief. Information will be shared to help parents and family members understand how children and young people grieve and explore some of the common responses and reactions.

Teachers: Supporting Bereaved Students

Wednesday, November 27th, 4pm - 5.30pm

This session is aimed at teachers, and will explore how they can support the children in their classroom who have experienced a bereavement.

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).

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.
- 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
- It is important for them to express the specific meaning this loss has for them
- 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.

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.

A child may need extra help or professional 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, 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 bingeing).
- Abuse drugs or alcohol.
- Are sexually promiscuous.
- Self-harm.
- Have suicidal thoughts or actions.

Such behaviours may 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.

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.

How FirstLight can help

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. We support families by providing crisis intervention, professional psychotherapy as well as art therapy and play therapy. All of our services are provided free of charge to bereaved families. Please don't be alone in your grief, we are here to help.



A WORD FROM FIRSTLIGHT ART PSYCHOTHERAPIST, ANDREA

Andrea is one of FirstLight's staff psychotherapists who joined our team earlier this year. She is a trauma-informed art psychotherapist, with a MSc in Art Psychotherapy and a BA in Psychology.

Andrea is registered with the Irish and European Associations of Creative Therapy, and is currently the chair of the Irish Association of Creative Art Therapists (IACAT). Andrea has over 20 years of experience working with both children and adults in community-based and non-profit organisations, including Temple Street Children's Hospital, Saoirse Domestic Abuse Service, Aoibhneas Domestic Abuse Service, The National Gallery of Ireland, The Royal Hibernian Gallery and in Pre-School and Primary school settings.

For Bereaved Children's Awareness Week, Andrea wanted to share with our readers a brief overview of her work as an art psychotherapist, and how she supports bereaved parents and surviving siblings of a child who has died.

"The death of a child is a profound and life-altering loss, often leaving families with emotions too complex to express with words alone. Art Therapy, also known as Art Psychotherapy, offers a gentle, supportive, creative space where parents and siblings can process their grief and express these emotions. Creative therapies like Art Therapy are suitable for all ages and are especially beneficial for young siblings who may struggle to understand or verbalise their feelings.

As an Art Psychotherapist at FirstLight, I have seen first-hand how parents use art to navigate their grief and honour their child's memory. Many find comfort in the creative process, which allows them to explore their feelings safely and even find brief moments of respite. Art Therapy provides a powerful and adaptable way for therapists to support grieving families, working with them in a trauma-informed, compassionate, and non-judgmental way.

All Art Therapists hold a master's level qualification, register with the Irish Association of Creative Arts Therapists (IACAT), and bring clinical experience and knowledge of the creative arts into each session. This ensures a high standard of professional care for families coping with grief.

One Art Therapy exercise I use with FirstLight families is creating "clay memory stones." These stones, shaped to fit the hand, are crafted in guided sessions that offer a somatic and calming experience. Each stone can be decorated by the person to symbolise and memorialise their child or sibling, the stones in the images were made by the art therapist as examples and are displayed in the therapy rooms.

Submit Referrals @ www.firstlight.ie

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