

Supporting young children who have lost a parent

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has estimated that 1% of children are likely to experience the death of their mother before they reach their 16th birthday. In England and Wales it is estimated that, each year, 7000 children will lose their mother before they reach 16-years old.

ONS has made this estimation from a Longitudinal Study which recorded the number of births in England and Wales from 1971-2000. It has not been possible for ONS to use the same methodology to calculate the death of fathers, however based on mortality trends, this number is expected to be higher.

This Good Practice Points (GPP) resource is part of a series of GPPs on supporting families with grief. Within this GPP, we will consider supporting young children who have lost a parent or primary carer.

Why child bereavement matters

The death of a parent is one of the most fundamental losses that a child can experience.

Children under 5 have limited understanding of what has happened; the way that they express their grief and continue to remember that parent is complicated (Dyregrov, 2008). They rely on adults in their life to help them to make sense of their loss and work through their emotions.

Early childhood experiences are very important in influencing a child's emotional health, resilience and social competence (David, Gooch, Powell, & Abbott, 2003), so it is important to:

- consider the issue of bereavement for pre-school children;
- think how we can best support them;
- reduce the risk of long-term problems.

The ability of the surviving parent to meet the needs of the child affects the child's adjustment to the death of their parent

Where the surviving parent is less able to meet their child's needs, the child is more likely to display difficulties such as anxiety, depression, sleep and health problems (Worden, 1996). This is particularly important for children under 5, as they will be more dependent on that parent:

- to maintain their care, routines and boundaries;
- to help them to feel safe at a confusing time;
- to be emotionally available to them.

Why child bereavement matters for health visitors

Health visitors are in the unique position of being able to support families at home. Visiting families in the home environment can give an insight into how life might be for that family; this early monitoring and support is key to helping the family support each other in their grief.

More information on page 2

For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this GPP version was created on 07/12/2020.

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Reactions to grief seen in young children

Children are never too young to grieve. Children under 5 usually don't understand the permanence of death, but they will experience it as a separation. Initially, they can find changes in the surviving parent's emotions and behaviour more distressing than the absence of the parent who died (Christ, 2000). Some of the more common reactions in young children include:

- separation anxiety, e.g. increased crying in a baby or a young child being clingy; anxiety may increase around bedtime;
- sadness and longing; becoming quiet and withdrawn;
- avoidance – may avoid things that remind them about death, including people who remind them of the deceased;
- anger or acting out difficult behaviour, which may mask sadness and depression;
- sleep difficulties – fears, nightmares or dreams, especially if there has been confusion about death and sleep;
- guilt – especially if they connect something they said or did with the death; for example, connecting being very angry and shouting “Go away” to mummy's death;
- repetitive questions, e.g. “When is Mummy coming home?”;
- regressive behaviours, e.g. bedwetting, speech regression;

- physical complaints – distress is often expressed physically; sometimes complaints may mirror those of the deceased;
- changes in behaviours, e.g. changes in sleeping or eating patterns, more tantrums. Children are often seen moving from one emotion to another very quickly and this is known as puddle jumping. It is thought to be an inbuilt safety valve to help cope with emotion;
- insecurity and worry about other family members.

Don't be surprised if they don't react at all

Sometimes young children will hear bad news, then want to get on with everyday life as if it hadn't happened. Reassure parents that this may happen and it does not mean that their child does not care. It is just one of their ways of coping.

Adherence to familiar routines is a way of coping and they will have times later on when you may notice reactions, but equally times when they seem OK too.

Remember that the surviving parent is also grieving. They may need support to manage the changes in their child, their own emotions and adjusting to life as a single parent.

Parents sometimes try to put their own grief “on hold” in order to focus on the needs of their children or can become immersed in their own grief and struggle to meet their children's needs. Parents may need help to find a balance of managing their grief alongside the needs of their children.

Grandparents and other family members could be involved in both caring for and supporting the surviving parent (where there is one) and their grandchildren.

Good practice points for health visitors

- Consider the individual needs of the child and their circumstances, their age, their understanding, their culture, who else is in their world now.
- Talk about the person who died – this can be comforting to the child. It's important to show them that we can talk about difficult things and talking may lead to more discussion.
- Encourage play with the young child. Young children express their feelings through play, which can offer an insight into how they are and what they understand about the death.
- Explore feelings and behaviours – the phrase “I wonder if...” can be helpful here, e.g. “I wonder if you are sad about Mummy dying”.
- Encourage the surviving parent to offer honest information to the child, at the child's own pace – making sense of a death can be like constructing a jigsaw puzzle.
- Very young children can only manage a few important pieces of the puzzle. As they get older, they will ask more questions and be capable of adding more pieces of information to their puzzle.
- Help the surviving parent to maintain the child's usual routines and boundaries – this will help them to feel comforted and secure. It's OK to be firm with a child's challenging behaviour – if that's what would have happened before the death – as long as the parent is mindful of why it might be happening for the child.

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- Be mindful of language. Young children will take explanations literally. Try to use simple, concrete words or phrases such as “died”, instead of ambiguous language such as “gone” or “lost”.
- Encourage memory work. Young children will have difficulty accessing their own memories of the person who died, so family conversations about the person who died will not only help them to make sense of the death but will also help them feel connected to them. Young children need sensory-orientated tangible objects to help them to remember the person, e.g. clothes that smell like them or a photograph.
- Encourage awareness about the future needs of the child. They are likely to want to know about memories and connections to the deceased and how they were involved in important events in life and, following death, especially funerals or other memorial events.
- Check out the wellbeing of the surviving parent and help them to consider their own grief as well as their children’s (see **iHV GPP “Supporting parents when their partner dies”**).
- Encourage and praise the surviving parent’s efforts and remind them that they can’t make it worse – the worst has already happened.
- Encourage the surviving parent to access practical help. They may be eligible for a Bereavement Support Payment.
- Remember to look after yourself when supporting a bereaved family. Supporting families at this time of immense pain can create feelings of inadequacy and anxiety in even the most experienced professionals. None of us are immune to grief and loss, and it is important that we recognise this work as emotionally demanding. Make good use of supervision and peer support as well as finding ways to unwind at home.

Further information

Winston’s Wish – The Charity for Bereaved Children

Offers support to families, training and advice to professionals, and produces practical resources and books. <https://bit.ly/35szRU4>

Helpline for families and professionals:
Freephone 0808 8020021 Monday - Friday 9am-5pm
Email: ask@winstonswish.org

The following resources can be bought via Winston’s Wish.

- We all grieve: <https://bit.ly/3meGEGD>
- Never too young to grieve: <https://bit.ly/3hm5LUe>

The Childhood Bereavement Network

The website includes a directory of services throughout the UK that offer support to bereaved children as well as other information and resources.

<https://bit.ly/3mer25W>

Child Bereavement UK

<https://bit.ly/3bKpYSI>

The Good Grief Trust

Offers an online bereavement support website for those suffering grief in the UK.

<https://bit.ly/38Bhb61>

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Acknowledgements:

This GPP was written by Suzannah Phillips, Clinical Services Development Lead, Winston’s Wish – The Charity for Bereaved Children and reviewed by Winston’s Wish.

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