

## Information for children, families and professionals during Covid-19

### A note to those supporting bereaved children and young people during Covid-19

A bereavement is a difficult time for adults and children. We know that there may be many families affected in the weeks and months to come across our city and our school communities. We know that family members, colleagues, friends, and children may get ill and people will be frightened and need support. We are sharing this resource containing information and signposting to resources in the event of a death/s within the school community.

**School Improvement Liverpool** and other agencies are able to support, by offering practical advice, guidance, and emotional support to aid coping among staff and the wider school community.

Most grieving pupils do not need a '**bereavement expert**', but instead support from familiar adults in a safe and secure environment. Familiar and trusted adults can support bereaved children and young people by simply:

- Acknowledging the bereavement
- Understand that feelings of grief are natural, and personal to the individual
- Reassuring children and young people
- Keeping to routines and structure where possible, to help provide a sense of safety and security

It is hoped that this information will help families and schools to feel enabled and empowered to support bereaved children and young people.

### Supporting bereaved children through difficult times

Frightening events widely reported in the media, such as the coronavirus pandemic, can cause children to worry about themselves and others. It is normal for children to feel unsettled when something scary is happening or has happened, and many will be upset, sad or fearful at times. Children who have been bereaved are likely to show a stronger reaction and may worry that they or someone they know will die.

## Here are some tips to help you support a bereaved child:

### **Talk**

Children and young people often find it helpful if they can talk about what is happening, helping them to make sense of events and feel less afraid. Even young children are likely to hear reports in the media or overhear adults talking about deaths due to coronavirus, or the risk of death from becoming ill with the virus. It's important to talk about their fears or anxieties honestly and openly in age-appropriate language. It may also help to restrict the amount of media they are exposed to, and balance this with other activities and positive things to focus on.

### **Be honest**

Give children honest factual information in language appropriate to their age and level of understanding and be guided by their questions. Children tend to pick up when questions are avoided and then may imagine all kinds of things, causing further anxiety. It's not necessary to go into detail but it will be helpful to explain things that affect them directly, such as why they are being asked to wash their hands regularly and how the virus is spread, why their school is closed, why they can't visit a grandparent or why a parent is working from home.

### **Acknowledge concerns**

Bereaved children may be concerned about someone that they know becoming ill or even dying. Explain that some people will have no symptoms and will be fine, most people will experience only a mild form of the virus and will get better but some people are more vulnerable and so we need to make sure they are protected. Be honest though and don't shy away from explaining that some people may die, as children need to trust that you are being honest and open with them, so that they can ask you other questions with confidence.

### **Create routines**

Currently, keeping to usual, daily routines might be difficult. But routines can be reassuring to children when everything else seems to be disrupted. If you are at home with your child, try to keep to regular routines such as meal times, school work, breaks, play and bedtime. Children feel more in control, and therefore less fearful, if given simple clear jobs to do, such as washing their hands properly, or simple jobs around the house.

## Get support

If you are struggling with your own reactions, try to get support for yourself. Children and young people are quick to pick up on the distress of others around them, even if the adults are trying to hide their feelings.

## Children and young people's understanding of death

Children and young people mature and develop at different rates, however, their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely based on their development and maturity, as much as their personal life experiences. As children grow and develop:

- They may need to look again at the details surrounding a death and will need time and space to explore its impact.
- Feelings they had when younger will be different, as their understanding develops and the meaning of death changes for them as they move through life.
- Children's understanding of death vary based on their stages of development. It is also important to note that children do not move abruptly from one stage of development to the next, and that characteristics from each stage may overlap. At any age, one's reaction to death is very personal and unique. We should always allow others to grieve in their own way, and avoid assuming we know how a bereaved person is feeling.

**Children under 2** are not likely to have a conceptual understanding of death, but are likely to react to changes in their environment. Some of the common behaviours that might be seen in children under 2 are:

Increased crying

Withdrawal

Disrupted sleep or feeding

### How to help:

- Reassure children
- Keeping to routines and structure where possible

**Between the ages of 2 and 5**, children can become curious about death, they might begin to use the word 'dead', and develop an awareness that this is different to being alive. However, they do not grasp that death is permanent, and can often think the person will return. Try to avoid phrases implying death, such as, "passed away" or "lost" to help avoid confusion or misunderstanding. Children at this age are naturally egocentric, and see themselves as the cause of events around the world. They may feel guilty and believe that they are responsible for the death of a loved one. They might also worry about being abandoned, or worry who might take care of them. At this age, children struggle to put their feelings into words, and will tend to react to loss through behaviours, such as:

- Physical symptoms, for example an altered appetite or disrupted sleep
- Separation anxiety
- Irritability or aggression
- Seemingly disinterested in play
- Language and toilet training may regress
- Repeat questions frequently

**How to help:**

- Show patience and tolerance
- Give honest answers, but do not feel you have to tell them everything in detail. Sometimes it can be helpful to give them bits of information that can accumulate over time—not everything at once.

**Primary school age (between the ages of 5 - 12)**, begin to develop a sense that death is permanent, and irreversible. As they become more aware of this, and become aware that death is a natural part of all living things, they may become anxious about their safety, or the safety of those close to them. Children may experience a range of emotions (guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness, worry about their own death), and react through behaviours such as:

- School phobia or poor school performance

- Physical symptoms or regression
- Becoming withdrawn from friends
- Aggression
- Worrying who will take care of them, and becoming 'clingy'
- Worrying that they are to blame for the death

### **How to help:**

Reassure children that the death is not their fault

- Provide opportunities to explore their feelings, and be able to ask questions frequently or repeatedly
- Provide honest answers that can be built on over time
- During Covid-19, children and young people may experience heightened levels of anxiety, in relation to the situation or the safety of loved one. Please see the resource: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing>.

### **Coronavirus: grieving and isolation**

- Being bereaved can be an extremely lonely time. Talking with friends and family can be one of the most helpful ways to cope after someone close to us dies. Normal advice is usually to avoid isolating yourself, but we are in a situation where increasing numbers of people are being told to self-isolate and cut all but essential physical contact with others.
- This could make feelings of loneliness and grief more intense. It could mean a bereaved person having to stay by themselves in the same house they shared with the person who has died, bringing up painful reminders at every turn. A bereaved family might be isolated together, and although this at times may be a support, at other times tensions and resentments could be magnified making it difficult for them to help each other. If children and teenagers are isolated it could be difficult for carers to keep them occupied and deal with their own emotions and fears. The impact of dealing with a bereavement, compounded with feelings of worry about external situations can mean that feelings of grief aren't fully expressed.
- Isolation can also make it harder to process grief. At times like this when there is a constant stream of new and distressing information, people can find themselves distracted from dealing with their grief. They could be worrying about the situation as a whole, or worrying about themselves or others.

- Practical concerns and considerations may also come up. The person who died may have been a partner, parent or carer and the bereaved person may be left without practical or emotional support at a time they need it most. Friends and relatives who might otherwise have been able to provide practical support, e.g. help with meals and shopping may also be isolating or preoccupied with their own family's situation.

- It is very common to **see, hear or feel the presence of someone who has died**. This can be more common in the case of traumatic bereavement, and if someone is isolated in a location where they saw the person die, or where they are constantly reminded of their illness.

Top tips to help at this time

- Keep regular contact with others via telephone or social media
- Look after yourself and get rest
- Seek practical help from friends, family and neighbours
- Don't feel guilty if you are struggling
- Reach out if you know someone else is struggling

## Support for school staff

Being alongside anyone experiencing a loss can be emotionally draining but supporting a bereaved pupil particularly so. The need for support for yourself is not a sign of an inability to cope or of professional incompetence, but a recognition that everyone needs help to carry out his demanding role. In order to support children and young people well, staff need to have support and care for themselves, physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

Points to consider:

- Staff themselves may be grieving if they knew the person that died. Anticipate that you may experience an emotional reaction
- Previous losses can resurface
- Some adults find it difficult to talk about emotions and feelings. Try to share your feelings
- Know your own limits and seek support when required
- When working with a bereaved child or young person you will come into contact with family members who may have their own individual needs. This can be emotionally demanding
- Don't be afraid to seek out support through external agencies which work with bereavement
- Involve others when working with a family if there are appropriate links – getting the balance right is important
- Look after yourself
- Do not offer something you cannot deliver
- You do not need to be an expert to offer effective advice
- Try to recognise when you are running on empty

## Local support

**[www.liverpoolcamhs.com](http://www.liverpoolcamhs.com) –Lots of information and advice to support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people**

### Liverpool Bereavement Service

Their Oakleaf service is dedicated to helping children, young people and families during the difficult process of grief and loss. They provide bereavement support and counselling to children and young people aged 4 to 18 to help them cope with their loss and to promote the health and well-being of each individual.

Contact: 0151 236 3932

<http://liverpoolbereavement.com/>



### **Bobby Colleran Trust**

The aim of the **Bobby Colleran Trust** is to empathically facilitate children, young people and families to develop resilience and coping skills to manage the impact of loss and change following a bereavement and to look forward to the future with Hope.

**Bobby Colleran Trust** provides the following services:

- Bereavement support to children and young people ages 4 to 19 who are bereaved of a family member or significant friend
- One to one counselling, group work and family counselling is provided in schools in Liverpool and surrounding Merseyside areas
- Support for schools who have suffered the loss of a pupil, staff member or other members of the school family. Support is provided through drop in, one to one or group sessions as arranged through school

- Telephone support is also available for any family member who is simply requiring some bereavement advice

Referrals can be processed by email to [aquarius.bobbycollerantrust@outlook.com](mailto:aquarius.bobbycollerantrust@outlook.com) to request a contact call for bereavement support or a referral pack



## Love, Jasmine

Contact: 07566 225 253 [www.lovejasmine.org.uk](http://www.lovejasmine.org.uk)

F: lovejasmine3101 Twitter: Love\_Jasmine31

**Love, Jasmine** aims to support families following the death of a child of any age.

There are dedicated support groups for parents, grandparents and siblings

**Love, Jasmine** provides guidance, complimentary therapies, advice and signposting.

**The Alder Centre** Provides services for anyone affected by the death of a child of any age and for any reason. **The Alder Centre** works in a way that is based on including all and recognising individual difference. Some people prefer the comfort and guidance of other bereaved parents and others that of qualified and trained professionals. The Centre provides both types of support. The service works directly with bereaved parents and also extended **family members and professionals who have been involved in the child's life.**

**The Alder Centre** also operates a national, **free phone helpline** staffed by trained bereaved parent volunteers

The helpline is open every day of the year - **0800 282 986** or **0808 800 6019**

**Alder Hey Children's NHS Foundation Trust**

**Eaton Road**

**Liverpool L12 2AP**

**0151 252 5391**



## **National support**

### **Child Bereavement UK**

The website provides useful links and resources for children, families and professionals to access and some specific coronavirus advice.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

Free helpline 08088081677. Website has lots of specific information relating to coronavirus

[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

### **Winston's Wish UK**

Winston's Wish offers a wide range of practical support and guidance to bereaved children, their families and professionals who support them. The charity also provides a Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021), for teachers or parents to call for information and advice about how to support bereaved children and young people.

<http://www.winstonswish.org>

### **ChildLine**

A free and confidential service for children and young people where you can talk about anything, including bereavement.

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

### **Young Minds**

A national charity for children and young people to support their mental health and wellbeing.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/>