



# Bereavement

## ChildLine Information Sheet



Many more people now live to an older age than at any time in history. This is mainly due to advances in medicine and social conditions that have occurred in recent years. As a result, far fewer children experience the death of a loved one (a parent, other relative or friend).

The loss or death of someone they care for is likely to be deeply distressing for a child. Loss can come about as a result of an illness, such as cancer; an accident, such as a car crash; or old age. Children can also face the loss of a loved animal or pet. This can be as significant as losing a relative or friend.

Bereavement is the word used to describe the loss that people feel when someone close to them dies.

Grief is the emotion that people go through as a result of the loss of someone they loved.

### **The way people react to death depends on:**

- the age of the bereaved person (young children do not have as clear an understanding as older children)
- their relationship with the person who has died.

### **Some common reactions to bereavement**

Each individual's reaction will be different and it is impossible to predict how someone will respond. There are, however, certain reactions that are common to children as well as adults.

**Denial** – some people find it difficult to accept that the person has died. This can take a number of forms, including constantly talking about him or her as if they were still alive.

**Guilt** – Some people feel guilty, perhaps for still being alive or for feeling in some way responsible for the death.

**Anger** – Some people feel angry towards the dead person for dying; with others who were close to that person, such as a surviving parent; or at others who have not suffered a loss.

**Fear** – Some people may have a fear of death, either their own or someone else close to them. This fear can often lead to strong attachments being formed to a close friend or surviving parent. It can also lead to practical fears such as who is going to look after them.

**Physical complaints** – These include loss or increase in appetite, nightmares, feeling tired, stomach aches or headaches.

Understanding the concept of death depends on the age of the child.

Very young children (under 5 years) tend to think of death as something that is temporary and that the person (or pet) that has died will eventually return. Their response may include feelings of being left behind, fear and insecurity.

Slightly older children (around 5-8 years) have a greater understanding of death, recognising that it is irreversible. However they can find it difficult to understand their emotional reaction to it, such as feelings of guilt or fear.

Children aged around 8 years and older have a more realistic understanding about death and the implications of permanent separation. They tend to react with similar emotions to an adult, such as extreme sadness and anger.

In situations other than death, people experience similar emotions to those described above. This can happen if they lose something that holds a great deal of emotional value for them, perhaps by splitting up with a good friend or a girlfriend or boyfriend after an argument.



# Bereavement

Sometimes people experience major events in their lives with different feelings and emotions. For example, one child may be positive and excited, but another may view this with fear and experience grief for the friends, family and familiar environment left behind.

## What children have told ChildLine

ChildLine received 1,146 calls and letters from children about bereavement in 2000/2001.

Children and young people call at various stages after death, some in the immediate aftermath, some many years later. Some calls describe the reactions of other people and how they find it difficult to know how to respond to a person who has been bereaved.

*Laura, 10, described the hurt she feels when she thinks about the death of her little brother. 'My body goes tight. It's as if it's being squeezed together.'*

*Simon, 16, contacted ChildLine as he had just been told that his father was dying of cancer and did not have long to live. 'I can't talk to anyone about this, I'm scared of crying in front of them.'*

*Veronica's grandmother died in a car crash a year before. She described the feelings she gets when she spends a night at her friend's house. 'I want to have fun but I feel scared that something will happen to my mum.'*

*Mark, who was 14, called to say that his friend had died a few days earlier. He told the ChildLine counsellor that he felt sad and low. 'I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye.'*

## How ChildLine can help

It is often difficult for children to talk to others about their feelings. For example, a child may feel concerned about upsetting a surviving parent further, or

that the surviving parent would be too sad to listen.

ChildLine takes children and young people's problems seriously, giving them a chance to talk in confidence about their concerns, however large or small. ChildLine counsellors can also tell them where to go for more information, including local sources of help and advice. This service is free and available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

## ChildLine

Freephone: **0800 1111**

or

Freepost 1111  
London N1 0BR

or

**ChildLine Minicom: 0800 400 222**

Mon - Fri **9.30am - 9.30pm**

Sat - Sun **9.30am - 8.00pm**

## Other sources of help

### Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse House,  
126 Sheen Road, Richmond,  
Surrey TW9 1UR

Telephone: **020 8940 4818**

Helpline: **0870 167 1677**

**[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)**