

# Supporting a bereaved child during Covid-19

**acorns**  
Your local children's hospice



## About Acorns Children's Hospice

At Acorns Children's Hospice we have years of experience of working with loss and we know that there is no such thing as a one size fits all approach to grief. The internet is overflowing with information and advice on how to support children and young people and it can be difficult to know where to start. We have reflected on the resources available (updated for the pandemic) and we hope they will help you and your family navigate your personal loss in a way that is most comfortable for you.

## Impact of the pandemic

We recognise that our families' wider circle of family, friends and community may be affected by Government restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is especially true when it comes to bereaved children and young people. Schools, activity groups and routines which would usually provide comfort and community following the death of a loved one may not be available or may feel very different. We also understand that the impact of families not being able to come together at times of bereavement may affect the grieving process.

## Childhood bereavement

Grief is a natural reaction to the death of someone we love or care about. We can experience a mixture of changing emotions and there is no one 'correct' way to grieve. It is important to know that children and young people of all ages experience grief too, though it will often present itself in ways that are different from adult grief. Childhood bereavement is not linear and can appear quite confusing. It is often referred to as 'puddle jumping' because one moment they can appear distraught (as if they're up to their middles in it), and the next they can appear to have forgotten all about it. This is completely normal. Young children are unable to manage big feelings for very long so they will naturally try to regulate and calm themselves by doing the activities which usually help them feel safe, such as playing and being active or creative.

Children and young people are still developing a sense of self and learning about their place in their family and community. The stage of their development, personality, age and understanding will all determine how they process events, so it is important that they are given clear and factual information by someone who knows them well. Use words they understand and be honest about what has happened without overloading them with detail. If you do not know the answer to a question it is okay to say so openly. Asking children and young people to repeat what they have understood can be a helpful way of making sure they have taken on board what you have said. They may look to the adults around them to help understand what they are feeling - letting them see that getting upset is okay will show them their feelings are not wrong or weird.

As children and young people get older, their understanding of the world will change and so their grief will often be revisited at key times in their development. They may need to think about their loss again from a more mature perspective and it might come

as a surprise that they start thinking or talking about losses experienced years ago. This is a very natural way of applying their new knowledge to complicated emotions and events which needed to be kept simple when they were younger. You can help them process thoughts and feelings by talking as openly as possible with them. This is also why it's important to keep information honest so that it can be added to later without causing confusion or mistrust.

Adolescence is a time of significant and rapid change when teenagers struggle to balance issues of identity and independence. A bereavement at this time can have a big impact on many aspects of life. Adolescents need clear and accurate information at the time of a death at a level appropriate to their age and understanding. Being involved in the family's grieving rituals can help them but it is important to check in with them discreetly about whether the level of involvement feels enough or too much. They may wish to take an active part in funeral arrangements or to mark the death in their own way. They may also need help in knowing how to talk about what has happened with their friends as peers can play an important role in normalising their thoughts. Grief in teenagers can be challenging as it appears in many forms including confusion, challenge, withdrawal, crying, feelings of emptiness, loneliness, disturbances in sleep and/or eating patterns and exhaustion. It may sometimes be difficult to respond to the fluctuation between maturity and regression – most importantly, they need to know they are accepted in all their forms, no matter how messy it feels.

At Acorns, we use the acronym F.R.A.M.E. developed by Sibling Support Workers as a set of goals for working with siblings. These goals also fit with what the Irish Childhood Bereavement Network and other organisations (references on back page) identify as necessary in helping bereaved children and young people to cope.

**Fun** – when life gets especially tough, we all still need a sense of playfulness. No matter our age, being able to take a rest from emotional pain by doing something playful or creative can allow us to heal and process our loss. Children and young people may need to be reminded they have permission to find joy and laughter amidst their grief.

**Reduce isolation** – include children and young people in the family's rituals at a level appropriate to their age and understanding. Talking about the mixture of emotions present in grief and being involved can help them feel less alone. There may be specific ways that the child or young person would like to remember the person who has died. This could be paintings, poetry or visiting a special place. If this is not possible at the moment, you could find creative ways of bringing that special place into the home or garden through art or virtual tours.

**Acknowledge feelings** – accepting that behaviour is a form of communication can be really helpful. Notice the changes and be curious with your child or young person about it. Talking it through will help them identify emotions, develop the words to express them and help them see the connection with their responses. All feelings are okay – even really big uncomfortable ones. The less we fight with them the easier it will be to look after ourselves and each other.

**Model and master coping skills** – children will be looking to the trusted adults around them to learn how to process grief. Sharing and being honest about your own feelings will help them gain a sense of resilience. If you are grieving too, it will be important to find another adult to support your grief so that your child doesn't feel the need to take on that role.

**Enhance knowledge** – honesty is key. Children will fill in the gaps of what they don't know, often with something more frightening. Give clear and factual information about what has happened so that you can build on honest foundations as their understanding grows. Let them know you are open to questions and that sometimes you might not feel able to answer straight away or that you simply do not know. Children and young people can be resilient and adaptable when they feel secure that they know what's going on.

**Shared learning** – At Acorns we have added S for 'shared learning' as we recognise the importance of communicating different levels of understanding as children and young people develop. Big feelings can be overwhelming so please go gently and at a pace that is right for you all as you navigate the process together.

**If you are one of Acorns families and need additional support for yourself or your child(ren), please contact us directly.**

If you are seriously worried about a child or young person's mental health or if they are self-harming, contact their GP for specialist advice.

## References

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

[www.childhoodbereavement.ie](http://www.childhoodbereavement.ie)

[www.childhoodbereavementuk.org](http://www.childhoodbereavementuk.org)

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