

# Supporting young children and families through bereavement



**A guide for early years professionals**



**Anna Freud**  
**National Centre for**  
**Children and Families**

# Introduction

## Who is the booklet for?

The booklet is for childcare workers supporting early years children and their families who have experienced a bereavement. This includes nannies, childminders, play group workers, and nursery workers.

## What does the booklet cover?

If you are a childcare professional, it is very likely that some of the children in your care will have experienced the death of someone important and close to them. It can feel difficult to know what to say or do when a young child experiences a loss like this. Childcare settings can do a huge amount to help children make sense of the situation, their feelings, and reactions.

This booklet explains in simple terms:

- How young children might be affected by bereavement
- How you can support a young child who has recently experienced bereavement
- How you can support parents, carers and families of bereaved children
- Looking after and getting support for yourself

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# Bereavement in young children

Children may be affected by life events involving bereavement and loss in the early years of their life. This can include the death of someone in the family, like a parent, grandparent, or sibling, as well as the loss of an unborn child in pregnancy. It may also include another adult involved in their day-to-day care, a pet or a close friend.

Babies and young children are very aware of their environment and it's likely that they will notice and be affected if someone is no longer there – even if this is not immediately obvious or they are not able to communicate their feelings to you. They are also deeply sensitive to the emotions of those around them and will be aware if the adults in their life are grieving. Often, young children will need the support of adults to make sense of the situation, their feelings and their reactions. As childcare practitioners, you can provide invaluable support to children and families to get through this difficult time.

The first step in supporting young children is to understand the common reactions and emotions to a bereavement during early childhood and some of the things that have an impact on a child's emotions.

# What influences a child's response to bereavement?

Children's understanding of 'what death means' will influence their experience and reactions to loss. Understanding of death develops over time and will vary depending on age and stage of development.

- *Babies and young children under 2 years of age* will not understand the concept of 'death' but will be aware of the changes in their environment when someone close to them is no longer there. They will experience a sense of abandonment and a feeling of "missing" someone. They will often pick up on any increase in stress that might be caused by the bereavement. As they start to be mobile and talk, you might see them physically searching for the person who is gone, or speaking their name to ask where they are.
- *Young children between 2 to 5 years* will have an idea that death exists but not yet a full understanding that it is permanent. They might show curiosity about where the deceased person is and when they will come back. At this age, children often show "magical thinking" such as thinking they have done something that caused the death, or thinking they can bring the dead person back to life.

## **Closeness to the person who died**

Children's reaction to death will be different depending on the closeness and dependence felt towards the person who has died, and the implications this has for their daily routine and care. For example, the loss of a primary attachment figure, such as a parent or a carer who protects and loves their child, will be felt differently to other deaths where the relationship is not as close.

## **Previous experiences of separation and loss**

The death of someone might not be the only loss the child has experienced. Sadly, some children will have experienced more than one death in their short lives. This loss can build up and lead to more distress. This can be particularly important to keep in mind if you work with children in care who may have experienced a variety of separations and losses in their lives.

## **Reactions of the adults around a child**

The way adults grieve through their words, non-verbal expressions, and behaviours will have an impact on how a baby or young child feels both physically and emotionally.

# Ways young children usually react to change, stress and emotions

The personality of a baby or young child and the way they normally respond to changes in their routine and environmental stressors will impact how they respond to a recent bereavement. For example, young children who find change and transitions difficult and struggle to regulate their emotions might show a more pronounced response to their bereavement.

## Support available to the family

The availability of social support is important in helping children and families when they are experiencing bereavement. For example, neighbours and friends may help in looking after the child or helping with day-to-day activities. Social networks are important in helping families through bereavement and may include family, relatives and professional staff. Some families have better networks than others, and it's important to understand how much informal help a family or child gets, as this may have an impact on how much support you may need to provide as a professional.

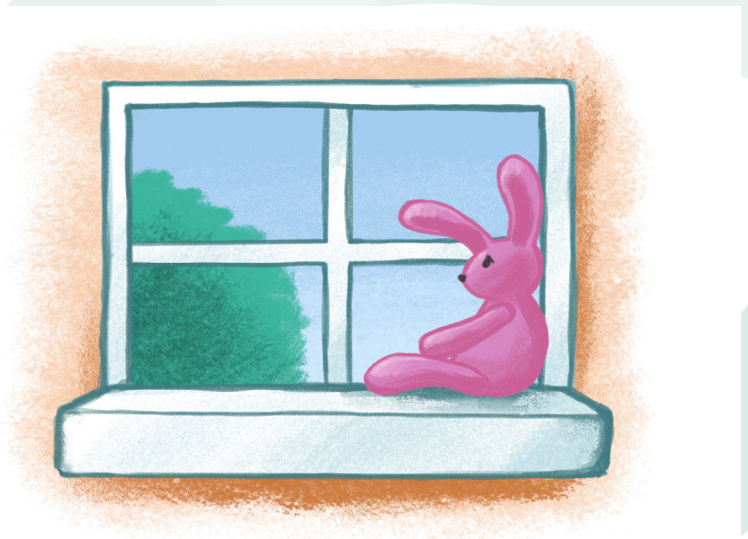
# Common reactions and emotions you might see in your setting

Every young child is different, and their reactions when someone dies will differ widely. Although responses may vary, there are some common emotions and reactions you might see in young children who have experienced a bereavement. It is important to remember that young children often show a delayed response and can move quickly through a range of emotions and reactions. These can include:

- **An increase in anxiety:** for example they might be more afraid of the dark than previously.
- **A focus on talking about death:** for example asking when they might die or focus on death in play activities.
- **An increase in strength of emotional responses:** for example becoming more irritable, tearful, or angry in response to a challenge.
- **Regressing to a younger age:** for example reverting to baby talk, or having toileting accidents.



- **Feelings of guilt or responsibility:** for example asking, "if I am a good boy and help with tidying up, can Grandma come and play at the weekend?".
- **Becoming quieter than usual:** for example they might start playing on their own more.
- **Reporting physical problems:** for example having more frequent tummy aches.
- **Increased dependency and clingy behaviour:** for example an increase in distress at nursery drop off
- **Difficulties in getting to sleep or staying asleep:** for example this may be connected to separation anxiety but may also be connected to the child being told that their loved one "has gone to sleep forever" which can make children worried about going to sleep themselves.

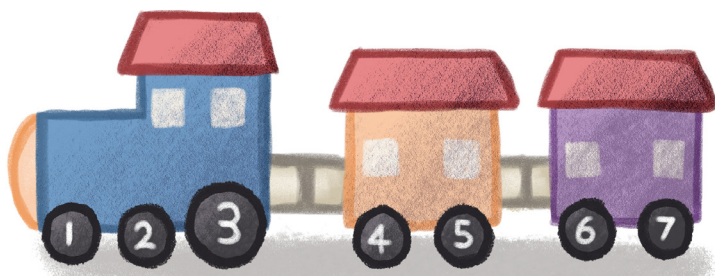


# How to support young children in your setting

Most children do not need a bereavement expert for effective support, but will benefit from the adults involved in their care who can make them feel safe, help them make sense of their emotions and maintain a normal routine. Although there is no prescribed method for supporting a bereaved child, there are lots of different things you can do in your setting to help.

## Checking in and making contact

Having good contact with the child's home and acknowledging the family loss will help to reassure those caring for the child that you are there for support. It can also give you information on how the child is doing which will help you to put a plan in place.



## Communicating with the family and finding out what the child knows

Families and adults will have different meanings they attach to death, depending on their experiences, their cultural or religious background and their social networks. This will influence what stories get told to children. It is important to find out about what the child knows, how the family explained or did not explain the death and what the family are happy for you to say in your setting. Talking to the family will also help you understand if there have been any other similar experiences that you may not have been aware of that may affect the child's experience of bereavement. Sometimes, carers will struggle to explain and talk about death with young children. If this is the case, you can support them in having these conversations (see section on supporting carers).

## Having the child's key worker on hand to provide support

It is so important for the child's key worker (or another staff member whom the child trusts and has a close relationship with) to be especially attentive to the child and provide extra support, reassurance, 1:1 time when needed.

# Supporting a child in your setting following their bereavement

## Acknowledging the death and what has happened

It is important to not leave it unspoken, and to acknowledge the death directly with the child. This will open the door of communication and take the responsibility from them to bring up the subject. If we say nothing, this might stop the child from expressing their worries, questions, and feelings with us later. Keep your language simple when acknowledging the death, "I'm so sorry to hear that Nana has died, this is a very sad thing to have happened to you".

## Attending, nurturing and reassuring

Let the child know that their key worker will be there to check in with them each day and let them know they can go to them to talk or to play if they wish. This will reassure them that there are adults who care and are there for them at a time of loss. Some children might not easily ask for help or understand how they feel. It is, therefore, important to observe and be attentive to the behaviours and reactions of the child to step-in when needed.

## Using play to facilitate dialogue

Play and drawings can be helpful in supporting a child to communicate some of their thoughts, feelings, or confusions that they may not be able to say directly. It is helpful for childcare workers to be attuned to this and pick up any questions that arise in this context.

## Using clear, consistent and concrete language when talking about death

Children may ask you repeated questions about death and dying after a bereavement. This might surprise you and leave you not knowing what to say. It can feel uncomfortable as an adult to use direct language with young children however it is important to not be afraid to use words like “death”. Children need language that is clear, concrete, and unambiguous. You can be direct and at the same time convey sensitivity through your tone and body language. For example, if a child asks what “dead” means, you can explain how the person can’t move, think, or speak, no longer need food or drink. It is important to avoid using words like “lost” which might communicate that the person might be found, or “gone to sleep” “went away” “resting” which might communicate that the bereaved person will return in time. It is particularly important to pay attention to a child’s creative work at this time and to use these times as opportunities to allow the child to talk.

## Letting them know you will be there to help when they struggle with a new activity

Sticking to their normal routine maybe one of the most helpful things as, in the event of death, there can be a lot of changes to the child's sense of security, normality, and comfort. This can be something as simple as being greeted by the same person every day, having meals and play at the same time every day.



# Common difficulties you might come across, and what you might do

As childcare workers, you might come across difficulties and reactions in the children you are working with that might worry you following a bereavement. These may be a normal part of child development, and response to bereavement but nevertheless need attending to.

## When a bereaved child seems 'fine' but is private and withdrawn

Many children respond to bereavement through being withdrawn and quiet. It is important to respect their privacy and acknowledge that they may want a sense of normality and security away from home.

If you notice that a child is more quiet than usual, you can let them know you are there for them and that they are still noticed and seen. This can include simple comments like "I'm glad you are here today" and "it is good to see you".

## When a bereaved child is upset and tearful at nursery

It can be really hard to see a child who has experienced a bereavement upset and sad. You may not know exactly what they are sad about, or what is going on for them, but you can share and validate their feelings. You can normalise their feelings and sit with them in their sadness.

You might catch yourself wanting to distract them and make the feeling go away but it is helpful to let them know it is okay for them to feel what they feel. You can help by naming what emotions they might be feeling like "sadness" "anger" and "fear" echoing this with your tone and expressions. You can normalise their feelings by saying death makes you feel sad too. This will help them to not feel alone. You also can share what kind of things help you feel better when you are sad too. You can give them a cuddle if they would like. You can use tools like teddy bears that you can each hug. You can think with them about a comforting object they can carry with them to get through difficult moments. If they talk about the dead person, you can think with them about pleasant and difficult memories.



## When a bereaved child behaves in a challenging way

When bereaved children show challenging behaviour, it is important to remember and accept anger and other feelings that might be underlying. Acceptance involves showing empathy, letting the child know you notice them being upset, angry and that this is okay. You can name their loss and let them know that feelings of hurt and anger are normal. You can encourage them to draw, play out their feelings and find safe physical outlets like punching a pillow to release their feelings.



# Supporting families and carers of bereaved children

Often, bereaved children will be living with and relying on adults who are also bereaved and trying to deal with a loss. It can be hard for parents and carers to know what to say and ask for support. It is important to communicate to carers that they can come to you for information and emotional support. Here are tips about things carers might need and seek help with and what you can do:

## Helping parents and carers talk to the child about death

Some parents and carers who have experienced a bereavement might reach out to you to let you know what has happened and ask for support to explain the death to their child. Some caregivers might avoid having death related conversations with the child, as they worry about upsetting them or getting it right or because “they just can’t face it”. As childcare practitioners you can provide valuable advice in supporting these conversations between caregivers and children.

# Supporting families to talk about death

When helping caregivers to explain to young children that someone has died, we would recommend the following:

- Encourage caregivers to use the words 'dead' or 'died' and explain what it means even if it feels difficult and uncomfortable.
- Tell them that it is important to use simple and honest language. For example, death can be explained by saying "when someone dies, their body stops working and they are not able to do the things they do when they were alive like moving, talking, hugging".
- Tell them to avoid explanations like the dead person is "asleep", "gone away". Explain that this might make the child fearful of going to sleeping or worry when people go away as they might not come back.
- Encourage carers to share their feelings with the child without overwhelming them. This will help normalise feelings and let them know that it is okay to feel different things at different times.
- Encourage carers to reassure the child that they still have people who love them and are there for them.

## Helping caregivers explain a miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of a newborn sibling

When there is a miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of a newborn in the family, it is not only the parents but also the young child who is affected. Even if the child is not told that a baby is on the way they can sense that something is “not right”.

During this time parents can experience a lot of pain and grief, which can make it hard to think about how to explain what happened to the young child. It is helpful to give an explanation to the young child and answer questions they might have to make sense of the situation. This can be a difficult thing to do, and caregivers might come to you for advice and support in explaining what happened to the young child. You can validate the difficulty of their experience and encourage caregivers to:



- Use simple and appropriate words to explain death e.g., “we have some sad news, your baby brother/sister stopped growing in mummy’s tummy and has died. Mummy is ok so don’t worry about her. Sometimes this happens but it is no-one’s fault – and we will miss him/her a lot.”
- Make sure that all the adults around the child give the same explanation as to what happened.
- Explain the distress the young child might see in them, without overwhelming them with emotion “We are sad right now because this is how people can feel when someone they love and wanted to meet dies. But we are really glad to have you and love you”.
- Respond in a consistent manner when the young child asks questions that can feel repetitive.
- Give reassurance through words and physically through cuddles.
- Try to keep to your routine as much as possible to help child feel safe.
- Make it safe to ask questions and share feelings.
- Follow a child’s cue when explaining or answering questions.

# Things parents and carers can do to support a bereaved child

You can give the following advice to caregivers who are looking after a bereaved child:

- Support the child to say goodbye to the person who passed away e.g., through rituals, making a drawing about what they would like to say to say goodbye.
- Try to keep a sense of normality through routines.
- Encourage the child to express how they feel by drawing pictures, and saying out loud what they would like to say to the deceased person.
- Spend quality time with them even if it is just for a little while to take a break from the difficult feelings.
- Encourage carers to reassure the child that they still have people who love them and are there for them.



# Supporting other children in your setting

When one child is affected by a bereavement, they might talk about death to other children or show forms of play around the themes of death and dying. This can lead other children to start to ask questions and develop curiosity about death. You can use the principles of talking to bereaved children about death with children who are curious and have questions. It is important to provide the same consistent explanations in your setting.

## Letting other families know about the bereavement

It might be helpful to let other families know when a child in your setting has experienced a bereavement. It is important to first discuss this with the bereaved family and ask whether it is okay for you to tell staff and families. You can let them know the child's name and information would not be shared with others. Letting other families know can help them understand and prepare if their child is affected and has questions about death.

## Attending to questions about death and being consistent

It's normal for children to be curious about death even if they personally haven't lost anyone. It is important to not ignore and attend to questions about death with a consistent and developmentally appropriate language (see page 13).

## Using story books

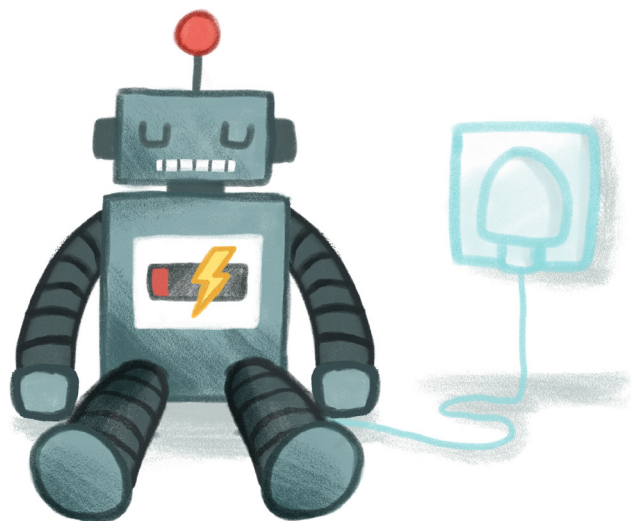
It can be helpful to ensure that your setting has at least one book on death and dying. If you notice other children asking questions about death or observing death and dying in play and conversations, you can read a story book together and answer questions children may have (see page 12 for recommendations).





# Looking after and getting support for yourself

Supporting bereaved children and families can stir up strong feelings. You might have to tolerate some difficult emotions and think about death and dying which can remind you of your own painful memories, losses, and fears for the future. It is important that you look after yourself and receive support and understanding from others. The need for support is not a sign of inadequacy or weakness, but rather a sign of strength that you are trying to look after yourself in carrying out a demanding role. Here are some things you can do to look after yourself:



- **Remembering that it is normal:** It is normal and okay to feel what you feel and to be emotionally affected or not be affected at all. Everybody has their own way of managing and coping. If something feels too close to home and you feel you are not the right person to support the child now, it is okay to ask colleagues for help.
- **Putting in professional boundaries:** Although you might feel a lot of pressure and responsibility to do something for the child and family it is important to remember that you cannot carry their grief for them. It is helpful to remind yourself that you are doing your best to be there for them and that this is good enough.
- **Showing care and compassion to yourself:** Think about what helps to sustain you and what you might do to treat your mind and body. How will you rest and recharge at home? What acts of kindness can you do for yourself? For example, having a cup of tea or some cake, going for a walk, talking to someone.
- **Sharing your feelings and experiences:** It can help to share how you feel with friends, colleagues, and family. It can help to talk to people and colleagues we trust and get us to recognise how we are not alone with our feelings and experiences.

# Where can I find further advice and guidance?

Common difficulties in the early years

**[www.annafreud.org/eycd](http://www.annafreud.org/eycd)**

## COMMON DIFFICULTIES IN THE EARLY YEARS

Includes advice and guidance on:

- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Bereavement
- Crying
- Play
- Relationship with keyworkers
- Separation anxiety
- Sibling rivalry
- Sleep
- Tantrums
- Toileting
- Trauma
- Withdrawn behaviour



Aggression



Anxiety



Bereavement



Crying



Play



Relationship with keyworkers



Separation anxiety



Sleep



Tantrums



Toileting



Trauma



Withdrawn or passive behaviour



# Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

## Working with babies, young children and families on digital platforms



A guide for early years practitioners



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## Helping babies and young children under 5 through the coronavirus crisis

The coronavirus crisis affects everyone, including babies and young children. They might be affected by the anxiety of their parents, huge changes to their routine, or by a variety of losses, like not being able to see family members or no longer having contact with playmates.

If you are an early years worker, a parent, or a carer, there may be ways you can help



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## What is attachment?



A guide for early years workers on  
using attachment ideas in their day  
to day practice



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## Helping your toddler grow!

- Toddlerhood is an exciting time for your little one: the world is there for exploring, and your baby will want to try everything out!
- Toddlers have lots of big feelings, like anger and frustration, that they can't always express in words. This can be overwhelming for them, and a challenge for you to manage. You can help by saying out loud what you think they might be feeling.
- During toddlerhood, you are called upon more than ever to be calm, predictable and forgiving despite sometimes feeling challenged and frustrated yourself.
- No doubt, your toddler will have lots of knocks and falls as they experiment. Try to step back and let them try things out on their own (as long as it's not too dangerous!).



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Download these free from:  
**[www.annafreud.org/eyresources](http://www.annafreud.org/eyresources)**



## External advice and guidance

The below organisations offer help and support for families who have been recently bereaved which you may wish to sign-post to. Each of the organisations have recommended lists of resources including books for children under 5 which your setting may find helpful:

[Child Bereavement Network](#)

[Child Bereavement UK](#)

[Cruse Bereavement Care](#)

[Grief Encounter](#)

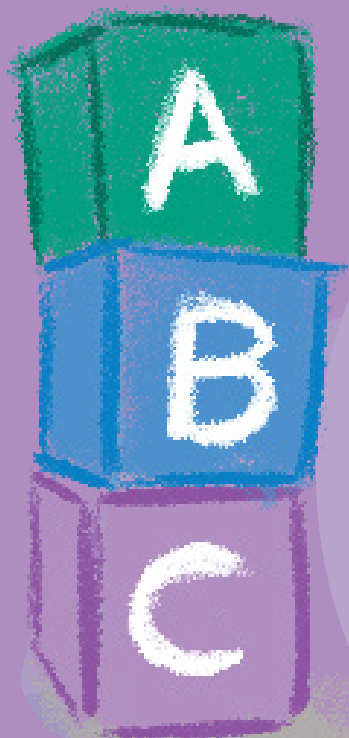
[Sands](#)

[Winstons Wish](#)





# Early Years in Mind



Early Years in Mind is a free learning network for early years staff and practitioners hosted by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

The network was developed by mental health experts at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

To join the Early Years in Mind learning network, please visit [www.annafreud.org/eyim](http://www.annafreud.org/eyim).

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