

# Supporting children and young people who are grieving



**Cruse  
Scotland**  
Bereavement Support



# Children grieve in a very real way



Freephone helpline: **0808 802 6161**



Webchat service: **[crusescotland.org.uk](https://crusescotland.org.uk)**



Email: **[support@crusescotland.org.uk](mailto:support@crusescotland.org.uk)**

## Children and grief

The pain of losing someone we love is unlike any other pain. It challenges the whole basis of our lives. The security we have built up on the foundation of loving relationships is shattered.

If that is true for adults, who can think it through and rationalise it in some kind of way, then it is also true for children who have little or no experience of loss on which to base their coping.

So often we are told that children are resilient, that they do not really understand these things, or that they need to be protected. Children grieve in a very real way, as their age and understanding of death allows. Frequently they have questions, some of which can be upsetting for adults. If children feel their

questions are not heard, or not respected, they may bottle up their feelings and possibly have more serious problems with this death, or others, in the future.

### **We need to be honest with children**

Telling them the person has died, explaining what this means at a level they will understand. The language we use is important.

If, for example, children are told the person has fallen asleep, they may develop a fear of going to bed in case they die too.

*Turn over to continue.*

Religious explanations can be helpful only if they are part of a family's ongoing religious faith.

### **Help children to understand that death is natural**

All living things die, accidents happen, and illness and old age are all part of the life cycle of people and animals.

### **Children may feel hurt or angry that the person has gone**

Or may feel that it is because of something they have said or done. It is important to allow children to express these feelings, and to reassure them that they are not to blame. Help the child to reflect on the fact that the person who has died loved them, and that that love goes on.

### **Children will move in and out of their grief**

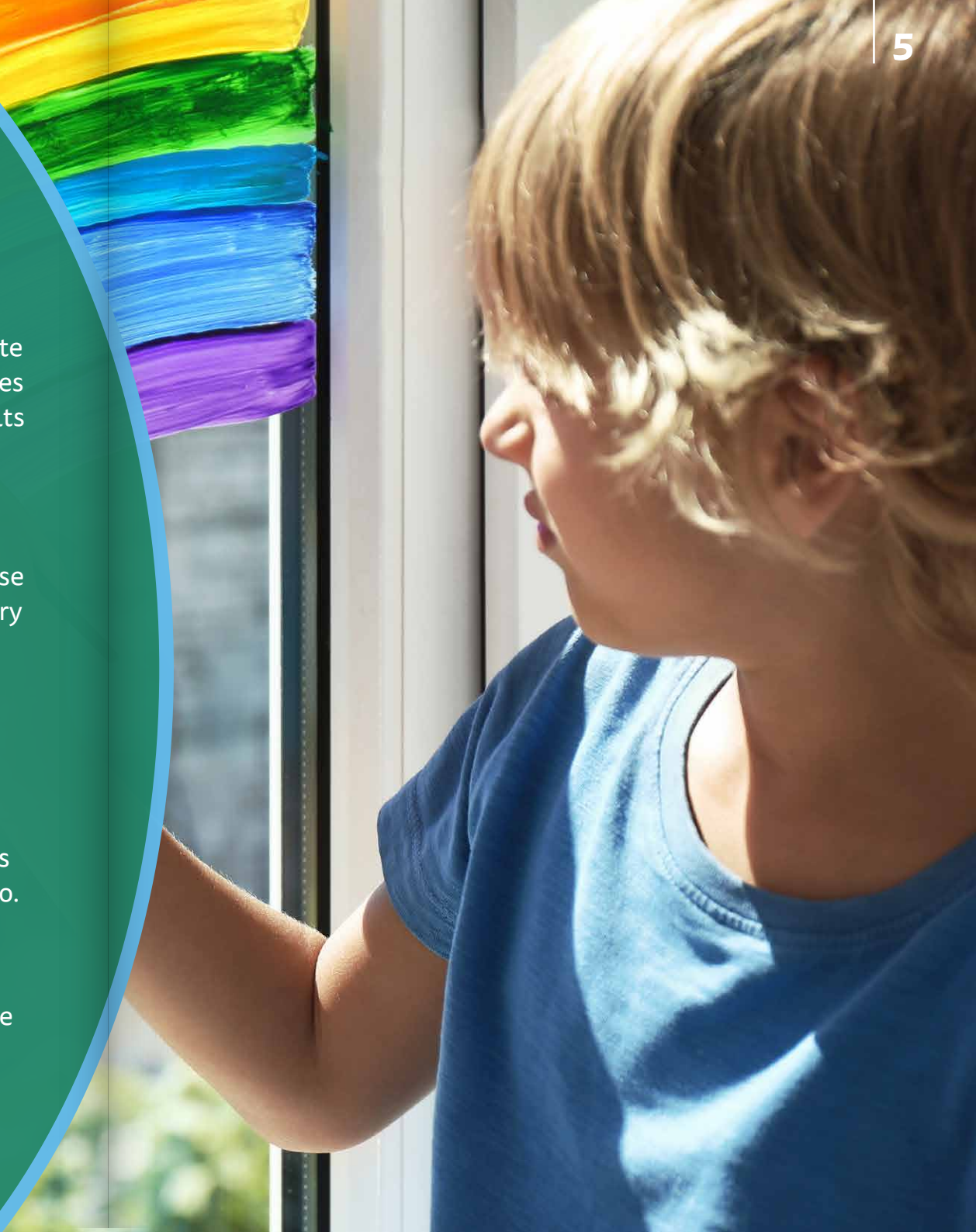
Sad and tearful one moment, and perhaps playing or making what adults feel are inappropriate remarks the next. Sometimes this is a way of testing adults to see if it is alright to feel that way.

It is important that those caring for children recognise this range of feelings and try to offer support.

### **The death of someone close**

This will often create new thoughts in a child about the fact that they, or others close to them, could die too.

Again it is important to be honest – everybody dies sometime, but most people live a long time.





### **Worry about going to the funeral**

Adults often worry about whether or not children should view the body or attend the funeral. Much will depend on the child, and it is important to listen to what they say. If they are to be present then they should be prepared by telling them what will happen.

Your funeral director may be able to help you with this. It may also be helpful to tell the person conducting the funeral that there are to be children present.

### **Involving your children**

Younger children can be given the opportunity to draw or write something to be placed with or in the

coffin; older children often appreciate being asked for ideas for the funeral – for example a special piece of music or a favourite memory which can be shared with others.

### **Keeping the memories**

Children often find it helpful to create some kind of memory box. Perhaps with photos, a keepsake or their own drawings of the person.

This can be a useful shared task which can help a child to talk about their feelings. Children may express their feelings in many ways – from quiet play and drawing to noisy music and aggression. Adults need to be ready to accept and understand this.

# Common for children to blame themselves



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## In brief

Like adults, children need to understand that grief is a journey. When they feel really upset, it helps to know that others are upset too, but that in time the pain will ease.

**It is best to tell children the truth** – at a level they can understand.

**Allow children to ask questions** – even if, to you, some of these seem inappropriate.

**Answer** children's questions simply and honestly.

**Remember** children will move in and out of their grief.

**Allow** children to attend the funeral if they wish – first explaining what will happen.

**Encourage** children to have something to hold on to – such as creating a memory-box or a photo album.

**Death** can bring feelings of insecurity – try to maintain some routine for children.

**Don't be afraid** to show how you are feeling – it is helpful for children to know that you are sad too.

**Remember** to tell schools about the death – it will help teachers to offer support.

**Reassure** children that they are not to blame – it is common for children to blame themselves for the death.

# Further support to help



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## Books about death and dying: the children

- What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?
- When People Die?

## Stories for younger children:

- Badger's Parting Gifts
- Dusty was my Friend
- Waterbugs and Dragonflies
- The Little Book of Loss ([www.littlewebsite.org](http://www.littlewebsite.org))

## For older children and teenagers:

- Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers  
[www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk)

Local libraries can often recommend other books.

Cruse Scotland offers specialist bereavement support services for children and young people, which are adapted to the age and individual needs of each young client.

To find out more about how we can support a child, please visit the website [crusescotland.org.uk/URL](http://crusescotland.org.uk/URL), call our helpline or email us.

If you work in an educational or childcare setting and feel staff would benefit from bereavement training, Cruse Scotland has a range of options available.

Visit the training pages on our website [crusescotland.org.uk/URL](http://crusescotland.org.uk/URL) or email us [schools@crusescotland.org.uk](mailto:schools@crusescotland.org.uk) for more information.



**Cruse  
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Bereavement Support

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