

Bereavement, Grief and Children.

Bereavement can describe the loss of ANYONE or ANYTHING that has been important in one's life. That might be family, friends, pets, separation, divorce, moving house, leaving school. All these can affect a child powerfully so that they grieve for the loss.

Grieving is a process of several stages: feeling the pain, accepting the loss, and then adjusting to it by letting go. It involves feeling and expressing all the emotions you have. It also means slowly accepting the reality of what has happened and learning to live with the change that has taken place in your life.

It is neither helpful nor appropriate to compare or judge the intensity of feelings involved in grief. Everyone is different. Time alone does not heal - it is only through grieving that we begin to work through the pain. Grieving is different for everyone. There is no right way to do it. We do as we must, in our own way, at our own pace. This is no less true for children and young people when someone important in their life dies.

When a parent, sibling, or someone important in a child's life dies it can feel daunting for the adults caring for that child to meet their needs when they themselves are grieving too. Parenting in bereavement can feel especially challenging. Try not to expect too much of yourself and remember that while much of your concern is likely to be for your child, you too need support.

Children react to grief and loss in different ways depending on their age and the nature of the loss, for instance how close they were to someone who died.

What helps:

- Children learn how to grieve by watching the adults around them, and just like adults need to find ways to express their feelings about the death and life without that special person. When someone dies, children in the family, however young, will realise that something has happened and will need help to express their feelings. It is important to explain to your children why you are sad and upset, in words that they can understand. Don't be afraid to show them how you feel - this helps them know it's OK to feel the way they do. Children tend not to stay with very sad feelings for long, though, and will dip in and out of their grief.
- Children grieve like an adult but they express it in different ways. Children need information and honesty to help them in their grief, and they need to be able to trust the adults around them. Due to emotional immaturity, a child may not have the thinking abilities to make sense of what has happened. A child tends not to have the words to describe their feelings, thoughts and memories. Their behaviour is your guide. Is he or she irritable over every little setback? Do they burst into tears every time they are thwarted? It might help to think of grief as a deep river, flowing beneath the surface of your child's life and like a river, every now and then the pressure become intolerable and bursts through the surface. This behaviour is very hard for you to bear because you probably feel the same way. If you can, hold your child to comfort him or her, just as you would like to be comforted yourself. Gradually this tempestuous behaviour will settle down, although it may still recur from time to time – be patient and allow time for this.
- Tears “wash away” the pain – allow your children to cry if that is their natural response, as frequently as they need to. Stay with them and comfort them.
- School can be a haven for the routine it offers a child. The school timetable offers routine, stability and normality when everything else can seem changed and insecure. Please provide school with information about what has happened and how your child is reacting at home. This enables the school to be sensitive to your child's needs and to support them more effectively.
- We need to speak to children using straight forward, child friendly language that is appropriate to their age and level of understanding. Provide simple, clear and factual information. Allow them the opportunity to ask questions and answer openly, without over-

burdening them with too much information. Children, especially younger ones, often ask the same questions over and over again. While this can be draining, it is the child's way of checking out the reality and trying to make sense of what has happened. Some children may think that it is their fault. Answer their questions honestly, however difficult. Check their understanding, and reassure them that the death does not mean that they will also die. Be prepared for short and repetitive conversations. It is our responsibility as adults to ensure children have understood the information we have given them, but it is OK not to have all the answers.

- Try to find ways in which children can be involved when a death happens - the natural adult instinct to protect them often leaves them feeling excluded and confused. Even very young children can be helped by participating in simple rituals around a death. Keeping memories alive by remembering and talking about the person who has died also helps children in their grief. Lighting candles or incense, drawing a special picture, planting a tree, or marking a special place with flowers are all practical ways to help a child create their own rituals of bereavement.
- It is natural for children to be very intrigued and curious about death and what it means, particularly after a death has touched their life. The Junior Library stocks both fictional and factual books which offer opportunities to introduce and support shared conversation with children, some of which are listed below:

Junior Picture Books.

'Drop dead' – Babette Cole,
'Frog and the Birdsong' – Max Velthuis
'Goodbye Mog' – Judith Kerr
'Alfie and the Birthday Surprise' – Shirley Hughes
'Badger's Parting Gifts' – Susan Varley

Junior Independent Reading;

'Grandad's Attic' – Maria Rego
'Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes'

Worrying signs:

Every so often a child can get stuck in their grief. If a child of any age is experiencing any of the following, then it is recommended you seek professional help.

- Loss of interest in daily things
- Prolonged insomnia, loss of appetite, fear of being alone
- Excessive imitation of the dead person
- Repeated statements of wanting to join the dead person
- Isolation from friends
- Refusal to go to school

The school provides consultation and support from:

School Counsellor: Jane Pyrgos (jane.pyrgos@jis.edu.bn)

School Nurse: Ruth Moore and Miss Michelle (nurse@jis.edu.bn)

Sixth Form Counsellor: Justine Gardiner (justine.gardiner@jis.edu.bn)

staysafe@jis.edu.bn is an anonymous and confidential address on which you can contact the school counselor.

