How Children and Young People Respond to Sudden Bereavement

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“I have a little girl in my class. She came into school in the morning and all was well. By lunchtime her daddy had been killed and her life had changed for ever.”
How do you respond to shocking news?
With no time to anticipate a bereavement the child/young person experiences an overwhelming and overpowering emotional response, leaving them with feelings of confusion, a sense of being out of control and often unable to grasp the full implications of the loss. Quite simply, s/he is in shock emotionally and psychologically which may exacerbate the intensity of grief.
Facts

• Once a child has experienced sudden loss it may be very difficult for them to believe that the equilibrium of life can be restored.
• Children’s stress reactions are normal human responses to unanticipated, sudden, frightening events.
• The nature of a child’s distress is largely determined by the nature of the event.
• The possibility that another sudden loss may occur is likely to increase the trauma the child experiences.
• For the child to recover from the event, it has to be incorporated into the present time and into the child’s future.
When it happened it was like everything was upside down.
How Children and Young People Cope with Sudden Loss

How well children/young people cope is dependent on several interrelating factors:

- Cognitive development
- The presence of primary carers
- Significant others in the person’s life
- The child’s/young person’s capacity to express emotions
- The maintenance of familiar routines
- The stability of the home environment
- Levels of support from within and outside the home
- Culture
- Media attitudes
- Time
I don't know where my baby brother is now
The doctor told mum and dad my brother had died. They think about what he said and where my brother is all the time.
Children’s and Young Peoples’ Responses to Traumatic Events

- Fear of new situations
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Withdrawal
- Lethargy
- Tiredness/sleep disturbance
- Psychosomatic illness/accident proneness
- Hyper-vigilance
- Changed eating behaviour
- Concentration difficulties
- Pessimism about the future
- Low self-esteem
- Inability to form new relationships.
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Angry
Sad
Frightened
Puzzled
Worried	Tense
My heart fell down
Kim
My people at home are frightened
Keep out of my life. I have enough going on without you.
On the day of the funeral a tornado, a black fog and hail came into my body all at once

Jamie, Aged 11
The hurt of the pain inside me splits my heart in two
4 Main Categories of Questions Children and Young People Ask

- Questions which ask for information.
- Questions which check out emotional responses.
- Questions about the reason for what happened.
- Questions related to spiritual and religious concerns.
Why did you think?
Children and Young People may:

- Overhear adult conversations
- Ask repeated questions and need to hear what has happened many times
- Need information about what will happen next
- Talk in a very ‘matter-of-fact’ way about the death
Who am I?
It is important to:

• Consider the age and developmental level of the child/young person.
• Listen carefully to exactly what is being asked.
• Think about any unspoken contexts within a question.
• Clarify any confusion or misunderstanding.
• Reply to questions in straightforward, easily understood language, avoiding clichés, euphemisms or rehearsed answers.
• Give answers that help dispel fantasy and encourage reality.
• Make distinction between physical remains and spiritual aspects of death.
• Acknowledge adults do not have all the answers.
What do Children and Young People Need?

- Open and honest communication
- Someone who will be available to listen, to talk or to simply spend time with them
- Opportunities to talk about the person who has died
- Opportunities to express grief
- Opportunities to build memories of the person who has died
- Opportunities to be involved in rituals
Telling Sad Things

• Environment – take the child/young person somewhere quiet and private but where possible to a familiar place
• Avoid euphemisms and metaphors – use language appropriate to developmental age
• Ask the child/young person what they want to know – encourage questions
• Give information that is factually correct
• Repeat the information and check that they understand what has been said
• Be prepared to listen again and again and again.
Caring often means standing alongside children and young people who are travelling in uncharted territory and allowing them to set the pace and the agenda for their care.
Adults may erroneously presume that all children and young people are emotionally fragile. In truth, many are hardy and resilient. They have remarkable inner strength and determination to get on with living.
Me and my family were helped to make the fizzy feelings in our tummies better