



Supporting children and young people when someone important has died

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND CARERS



Grief support for
children and young people
in Oxfordshire



Who this booklet is for

This booklet is designed to help parents and carers as they support their children or young people through grief. It starts very practically – helping adults think about how to tell children and young people that someone in the family has died. These initial conversations and the language used in them are crucial in helping children understand what has happened. At a time when adults may be grieving too the booklet also gives some initial advice about how to support a child or young person in the family.



SeeSaw is a small, independent Oxfordshire charity founded in 2000 to provide grief support for local children, young people and their families, or those who care for them. We provide advice, information, resources, consultation, training and support for schools and, when appropriate, face-to-face support sessions for children and young people, usually in their own homes. We offer telephone advice and resources to enable family members and professionals to provide the support. Often we help them to find the right words, or to understand that a child's reaction is very normal for their age, or how to think about the situation from a child's point of view.

Introduction

When someone in a family dies it can be a devastating time for everyone. It can feel as though in a moment your world has been turned upside down. Adults often want to protect children from the pain felt when the person dies and either shield them from the truth, or exclude them altogether. What we know is that even within the same family each person will grieve very differently. Children are no exception. A child who is normally quiet and thoughtful may become more withdrawn. Children who normally ask lots of questions will continue to ask for more information to help them to understand what death is all about. Adolescents may escape to their bedrooms, or avoid spending time at home. What children and young people will need more than anything is the love and understanding of those who care for them. Where possible, sticking to normal routines and boundaries will help to hold things in place when everything else feels out of control.

The priority for most parents or carers following the death of a family member is how to get it right for the children. Many adults will talk about hiding their own grief, especially when the children are present. Adults who can show their feelings and explain they are sad because the person has died will model to children that it's ok to cry and it's ok to talk about the person and what has happened.

In this booklet we will answer some of the most common questions and worries that people have when they talk to us about their child's grief.



"When my partner was killed in a road traffic accident all of our worlds crashed around us."

How do I tell my child that someone has died?

Telling a child that someone they love has died is incredibly difficult. Some people still believe that the less we talk about the death the quicker children will forget. In our experience, not talking to children about a death can lead to confusion and sometimes regret and resentment later.

What we say to children when someone is dying or has died will vary according to the age of the child and the nature of the death, but the principles are the same. What children need is age-appropriate, honest information. Children will manage being told even the most difficult information far better than not being told, as they won't be using their imaginations to fill in the gaps.

When someone is ill and they are close to dying we can prepare the child by gently explaining to them that the person is going to die. It might even be appropriate for the child to make a final visit to the person to say goodbye.

A sudden death, however, can be hard to believe and it may take time for the information to be absorbed. Coming to terms with the person not coming back or not being able to say goodbye can be particularly difficult.

Sometimes being able to break the news of a death yourself may not be possible. When someone dies suddenly, the news of the death is often given without warning to the whole family. This might be either because the person has died in the house, or the family has had a phone call or visit from the emergency services. Hearing the news in this way can be traumatic for children and they may need support from the family or from grief specialists like SeeSaw to talk about the effects of this news.



“How do you tell a two year old and a five year old that a hearse is going to come round the corner with their daddy in – I had no idea.”

When telling children about a death the following points can be helpful

- Choose a quiet space and sit physically close to the child to offer the support they will need. Where possible, if there is more than one child in the family, tell all the children together about the death.
- Tell the children as soon as possible after the death. Delaying the news can risk the children hearing about the death from someone else, possibly in the school playground or on social media.
- Start by explaining that you have something very sad to tell the children.
- Be aware of the children's different levels of understanding. Try to use the word 'died' or 'dead' rather than words like 'passed' or 'lost', which can be confusing for younger children.
- Remember that children will respond differently to the news: some may cry and stay close; others may be angry or possibly still and silent. Younger children may behave as if nothing has happened.
- You may need to repeat the information several times for children as they try to make sense of what has happened. Over the coming days children may ask more questions as they try to build a bigger picture. Giving the information in bite-size pieces helps children to absorb what has been said without it being too overwhelming. As children ask for more information the next piece can be given.
- Respond to questions the children might ask as honestly and openly as you can. If you don't know the answer tell them you don't know, but reassure them that you will tell them when you do. Children need to be able to trust that you will be honest at this time, however difficult the telling is.
- Sometimes children worry that it was their fault that the person died. Reassure children it was nothing they did or said that caused the death.
- It's important that other family members know what you have told the children so that they say the same thing and use the same language. This will avoid confusion or giving mixed messages.
- Children will want to know what is going to happen next. This might include conversations about the funeral, returning to school, general childcare and so on, all of which will help children feel supported and safe.
- Remember, all children will grieve differently depending on their age, personality, coping mechanisms and previous experiences of loss.
- Take care of yourself and don't hide your grief from the children. It's ok for children to see you sad and upset, but explain that you are sad because you are missing the person or are having a difficult day. This will show the children how they too can manage their sadness.



What do children need to know when someone dies?

When someone dies it can be a really confusing time for children as they try to understand what has happened, what will happen to that person's body and even where that person is now. Adults can often be surprised at the matter of fact way children talk about the person who has died and can find the questions they ask quite shocking. Younger children live in the moment and may want to tell people, including strangers, that someone has died. Older children and adolescents may be embarrassed about telling people what has happened and avoid talking about it.

Children need to know that when someone dies:

- their body stops working
- they don't feel anything any more like pain, heat or cold
- they don't need to eat or drink anything
- their body is a bit like an empty shell
- all the unique things about that person, like their smile, the way they smelled, what they did and said, will live on in the child's memory

Where is my special person now? Can I go and see them?

Children may ask to see the person who has died but adults can sometimes worry that that this will be too difficult for children to manage. All families need to make their own decisions given the particular situation, but what we know is that children benefit from being offered informed choices. For younger children, being able to see the body helps them to make sense of what they have been told.

If children ask to see the body then it is helpful to prepare them for what they will see. Where possible, if adults can see the person who has died first they can then tell children what the person will look like and what to expect. Giving children choices also means that it's ok if the child changes their mind.

We can prepare for and answer children's questions by telling them:

- where the body is now, for example at the hospital morgue or the funeral director's
- the funeral director will put the body in a special box called a coffin
- the body will feel cold because it's not working anymore
- the skin may look a different colour
- it may look like the person is asleep, but this isn't a normal sleep that you wake up from, this is because the body has stopped working



What happens at a funeral?

Parents and carers often wonder whether or not to take their child to the funeral, and friends and relatives can offer different advice about whether or not it is appropriate. This can make the decision more difficult. There is no right or wrong answer to this: it will depend on your family beliefs and knowing your child. Children, even very young children, can be prepared for what will happen at a funeral and be given the choice about attending. If children are given enough information and allowed to choose they will often say they want to attend, as it's an opportunity for them to say goodbye to the person who has died and is part of the next stage of coming to terms with what has happened. Children can feel excluded if they aren't given the choice.

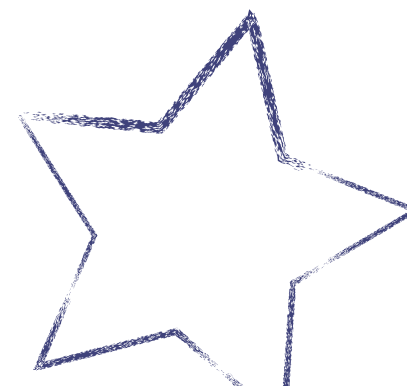
We can prepare children by:

- Talking about what will happen at the funeral and explaining that it's the time for saying goodbye to the person who has died.
- Involving children in planning the funeral – choosing songs, music, readings, poems, flowers. Children sometimes write a letter or poem about the person who has died and want to read it during the funeral. Invite someone the child knows well to support them in case at the last minute they aren't able to manage it.
- Children may want to put something in with the body such as a letter, poem, photo or drawing as their way of being included and saying goodbye.

- Taking the children to see where the funeral will take place, or showing them a picture.
- Explaining that at the funeral some people may be crying because they are very sad, and that some people may also tell funny stories about the person who died, so they may laugh as well.
- Outlining to the children what will happen during the day and who might be there.
- Taking a bag of activities they can do quietly during the funeral or arranging for someone the children know well to take them out if they get upset. This will help you if you are overwhelmed by your own grief.
- Letting children know that it's ok not to go to the funeral or to leave if it's too much. Think about other ways for them to say goodbye like visiting the grave or a favourite shared place. Lighting a candle or blowing bubbles are other options.



★ A booklet for children called 'What happens when someone dies' is available free from SeeSaw. The booklet is written to help adults explain to children in simple language and pictures what happens after someone dies. It also helps to explain to children about a cremation or a burial.



How do children and young people grieve?

Understanding if and how children grieve has been a debate for many years, and talking to adults about their experience of what happened when someone died gives us clues about how our thinking has changed. Different cultures also vary as to how much they involve children in grief rituals. The common belief today is that even very young children do grieve, although how they express that grief will be different according to their age.

What follows are some broad outlines of how children's development and understanding of death change with age. Recognising this helps us understand how we can best support children and young people following a death.

Very young children 0–2 years

Reactions:

Very young children and babies will react to a sense of loss rather than the death itself, especially if the death is of the primary carer. They may be affected by the changes in the emotional atmosphere around them. Sad faces may replace the normally smiling faces of carers at feed time. Babies and very young children may express this sense of change by becoming more clingy and fractious.

How you can help them:

- where possible wrap the baby in something that smells of the person who has died
- maintain a regular routine
- where possible ensure consistency of carers both at home and, if appropriate, at the nursery
- provide lots of cuddles and reassurance



Children 3–5 years

Reactions:

Children of this age think in very concrete terms so abstract language around death is very confusing. Using euphemisms to explain that someone has died, to soften the news, will add to the confusion so avoid words like lost, gone to sleep, passed away. Instead simply say that the person “has died and that means we won’t be able to see them any more.” Young children often use the word dead but that doesn’t mean that they understand the concept or permanence of death.

Despite frequent telling young children will still often ask when the person is coming back. These repeated questions can be very hard for grieving adults and older siblings to manage.

At this stage children will show how they are feeling through their behaviour, such as becoming very clingy on hearing that someone they love has died and rejecting the attention of other carers. This can result in some regressive and anxious behaviours, temper tantrums, bedwetting and often reluctance to go to bed alone. Children will show signs of sadness but only for short periods before escaping into play, acting out events through their play.

How you can help them:

- strong familiar routines
- lots of reassurance
- repetition of short phrases telling the story of what happened – “Do you remember I told you that sadly Daddy had an accident and died and he can’t come back”
- consistency of simple language used in the family and at nursery
- verbal and non-verbal expressions of affection and reassurance

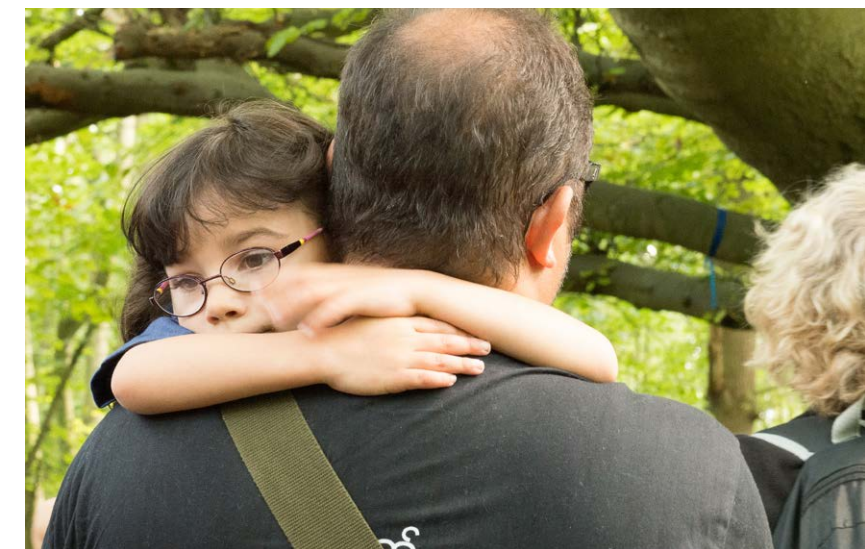
Primary age children 6–9 years

Reactions:

At this stage children may have a greater understanding that death is final. They can become afraid that other family members may die and this may lead to separation anxiety when the main carer isn’t there. Children of this age often ask lots of questions; they may use the right words but not necessarily fully understand them. They can sometimes even feel that something they did or said contributed to the death, known as ‘magical thinking’. This can lead to feelings of guilt, which children may not talk about but can contribute to changes in behaviour. It may be expressed as anxiety, aggression, nightmares, regressive behaviours and withdrawal. Children will move in and out of their grief, sometimes attributing feelings of sadness to the death rather than to being upset for some other reason.

How you can help them:

- stick to familiar routines and boundaries
- give clear, honest, age-appropriate answers to questions. If a child asks a question they are ready for an answer. Check out what the child is actually asking – don’t make assumptions
- use phrases like “I wonder...” or “Tell me a bit more about what you are thinking...”
- help children to understand and express complex feelings associated with grief
- seeing adults grieve will help children model their own grief reactions
- give lots of reassurance



Children 9–12 years

Reactions:

By this age children fully understand the finality of death and begin to fear death for themselves as well as others. This can lead to a range of worries and sleep problems. As children get older they may want a more detailed explanation about the death that can sometimes worry adults. While they are able to articulate their feelings they may be overwhelmed by their emotions of grief and act out the feelings in tearfulness, angry outbursts and fighting. Where the death coincides with the onset of early puberty mood swings are likely.

How you can help them:

- stick to familiar routines
- be clear about family boundaries
- use careful language in explaining events
- normalise grief reactions and reassure them it won't always feel like this
- be available to talk, acknowledging your own feelings so children don't feel they have to protect you or you them
- offer space and time to talk about the person who has died, beginning to build memories
- involve them in planning the funeral and support them if they want to contribute on the day

Adolescents 13–18 years

Reactions:

With so many changes already taking place in an adolescent's life the death of someone they care about can lead to a potent mix of emotions and unfamiliar behaviours.

Like adults, adolescents understand that death is final and will often grieve for future milestones where the person who has died will be missing, such as graduations, learning to drive, getting married, etc. They will have a greater understanding of the impact and implications of a death on the family and may try to take on inappropriate caring roles.

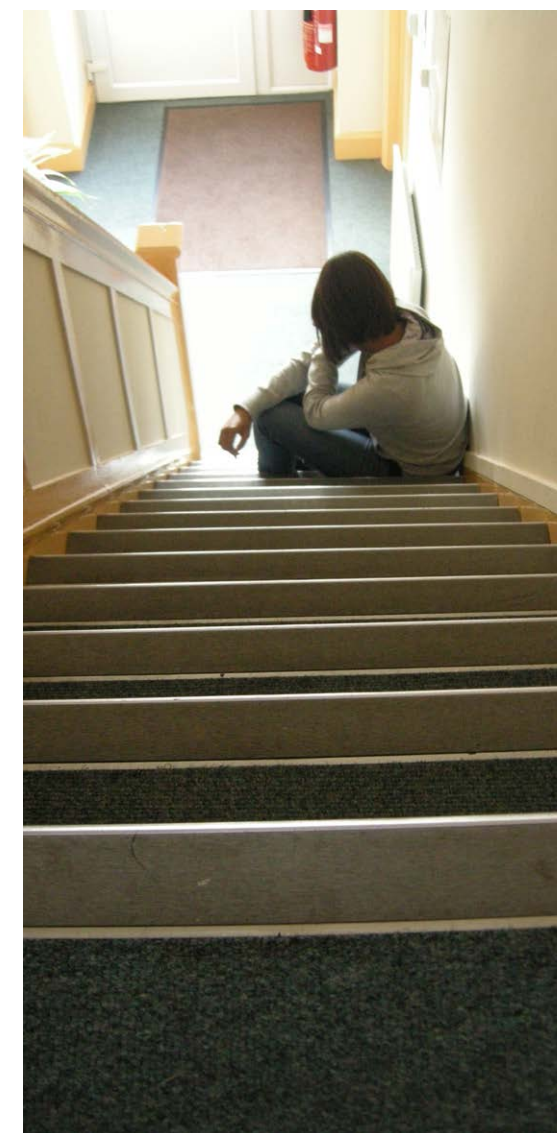
Adolescents may resist grieving outwardly or talking about their feelings. This will often be in line with their temperament. A young person who doesn't normally express their feelings may appear withdrawn and as if they aren't grieving. But a young person who is usually open about how they are feeling is more likely to have the appropriate language to express their grief and want to talk about it. Both young people will be grieving but expressing their grief in different ways. Recognising that these grief reactions are normal can help adults to respond to the needs of the young people in a family.

Young people will want to know the details of what happened and to be involved in what happens next. Being given choices about how things are managed at home and at school will be important. This will include wanting to be involved in plans for the funeral, communication with school and other issues that affect the family and their future.

Friendships will be important in providing times of normality and respite from the intense feelings of grief. It can be a difficult time for bereaved youngsters, as they want to appear 'normal' with their peers when all around them everything has changed. Sometimes in response to their grief young people's behaviour changes – they may start taking risks or cutting themselves off. Or they may become extremely focused on studies or work as a way of managing their distress. At this stage parents can find it difficult to recognise what is bereavement and what is normal adolescent behaviour.

How you can help them:

- help to normalise grief reactions
- reassurance
- support – appropriate to their needs
- accept their mood swings while still holding reasonable boundaries
- be available to talk if and when they want to, or suggest someone else
- involve them in discussions and decisions
- give them choices
- involve them in how things are managed – school, funeral, home
- help them to develop coping strategies
- give them opportunities to engage with their peer group – permission to have fun
- recognise that not all their responses will be about the bereavement



Other factors that affect children's grief

Alongside these different ages and stages that affect a child's grief, other factors may also contribute. These may include:

- the relationship of the child to the person who has died
- the nature of the death, whether expected, sudden illness, road traffic accident, suicide, manslaughter or murder
- the experience of previous deaths or losses
- involvement in 'goodbye' rituals
- communication within the family and opportunities to discuss memories and express feelings
- additional support from family, friends or other professionals, e.g. teachers
- additional losses that come about because of the death, e.g. change of home, school, family
- different religions and traditions may have their own rituals or expectations about how grief is expressed



When should I send my children back to school?

Children and young people often surprise us by wanting to return to school the day or a few days after they have been told that someone they care about has died. This return to a normal routine can be a way of managing their grief and escaping some of the feelings at home. Often the person who has died hasn't been part of the school day, so being in school can give some respite from what has happened. However, some children may want to stay close to family members in those early days after the death. Even within the same family children may want to go back to school at different times.

Here are some suggestions to think about:

- Before children return to school it is advisable to make contact with the headteacher or head of year to tell them what has happened.
- Talk to your child about what they think will be most helpful in making the return to school.
- Decide with your child how they would like information about the death shared with staff and pupils. Some children and young people like to be there when their classmates are told, or even do it themselves; others prefer not to be. Older children and adolescents may not want a general announcement but prefer to choose who should know and tell them themselves.
- The decision about who should be told may affect what time your child returns to school on that first day. Some children will want to keep things as normal as possible so arriving with everyone else might be important.
- Schools will usually recognise the needs of bereaved children and accommodate what works best for the child and the family in terms of a later start time or shorter days.
- Encouraging children to return to school with support from the school will help to establish familiar routines. A delayed return to school can sometimes make it more difficult for a child or young person, especially if there were previous issues around school attendance.
- Children can become very anxious about separating from a parent or carer when someone in the family has died. Depending on the nature of the death they may worry that something else 'bad' might happen while they are at school. Children will therefore need lots of reassurance at this time to resume normal routines.



You may find it helpful to:

- clarify with your child who has been told about the death in school and who the child can talk to in school if they are upset
- be clear with your child and the school about any change to arrangements regarding who will collect them from school
- talk to your child about things you and other family members will be doing while they are in school
- give them something to carry with them that connects them to the person who died or to you, such as a small photograph

- where children are struggling with separation anxiety it might help for the adult and child to choose matching key rings (maybe with a tiny cuddly toy attached). The child and adult can use this as a comfort while apart

★ **SeeSaw can support families in talking to schools. We also have a service for schools around how to support bereaved children returning to school, as well as offering them ongoing support. Schools can contact SeeSaw directly, or find our schools pack at www.seesaw.org.uk**



What we know about grief

Grief is a natural process – a response to a deeply felt loss. Many people are familiar with the idea that there are stages of grief, that you pass from one stage to the next and then you are 'over it'. This idea suggests that there is a set time to grieve, which can put pressure on adults and children to 'move on' before they are ready. In fact, we know now that grief isn't like this. As one young person described it, "Grief doesn't get better in a straight line."

Most young people who experience a death will not need specialist help. Support from their family and friends is often enough to help them cope with their grief. But parents often call SeeSaw to ask for support for their children to help take the pain of grief away. It's hard watching your child hurting; adults want to know how to get it right for their children, not just in the immediate weeks after the funeral but in the months and years ahead.

For adults and children the work of grief involves:

- accepting the reality of the death
- experiencing the emotional pain associated with the death
- adjusting to life without the person who has died
- finding ways to remember the person in your life as life goes on without them

Being aware of children's feelings and behaviours can be the best indicators of how they are coping following a death. Children express grief in words but also through physical reactions and behaviours.

Common reactions may include:

- physical symptoms – tiredness, stomach aches, lack of motivation and energy, disturbed eating and sleeping patterns
- mixture of overwhelming feelings – sadness, anxiety, anger, regressive behaviour, separation anxiety. It may feel like everyone in the family is running on a short fuse and is easily upset, which may be expressed in tears, arguments or anger
- changes in behaviour – some that are out of character and previous behaviours that become heightened. They can range from withdrawal to being irritable and aggressive. Expressions of anger are common
- loss of concentration and focus – this can particularly affect schoolwork
- withdrawal from usual activities is typical – life can feel pointless and it may seem wrong to have fun. Sometimes it is linked to separation anxiety

"I never knew grief felt so much like fear."

CS Lewis

"It was as if I was living in a dark, cloudy bubble with no way of getting out."

15-year-old girl

Supporting your child in their grief

- Allow the child to grieve at their own pace – grief is an individual process. Children may revisit their grief as their understanding grows and as they reach various milestones or transitions.
- Be there – grieving children need support and presence more than advice. Children often jump in and out of their grief. If a child is not displaying grief through tears or angry outbursts it doesn't mean that the grief has gone away.
- Provide times of fun – grief can be exhausting. Children need to know that it's ok to have fun and to play and do normal activities. Having fun doesn't mean that they have forgotten the person who died.
- Give a child choices – when the rest of life feels out of control it is important that children feel they have some control.
- Be patient – with yourself and your child. You may both be grieving. It's ok for your child to know that you are sad too. Children will avoid talking if they think it will make you upset.
- Be honest – children may continue to ask further questions months after the person has died. Answer questions honestly and age appropriately. Give information in bite-size pieces and check that the child has understood.
- Listen – grieving children often need to tell their stories repeatedly. Listen without judgement or interruption.
- Touch can sometimes say what words cannot, so hugs can provide reassurance. Remember that you can't fix it and there are no magic wands to make it feel better.
- Accept and encourage expressions of feelings – reassure children that grief is made up of many feelings. It is ok to cry, to be sad, angry or worried. Talk together about safe ways of expressing feelings, especially

- angry feelings – like kicking a football, hitting a pillow, screwing up paper.
- Building memories – remembering can be healing so offer opportunities to talk about the person who has died. Look at photographs together, tell funny stories, and remember the special times as well as the difficult ones.
- Believe in the child's ability to recover and grow – your hope and faith in their ability to recover may be needed when theirs fails.

★ See the SeeSaw website for further advice and resources: www.seesaw.org.uk



Looking after yourself

- Grief can feel lonely, so accept practical offers of help from family and friends as well as emotional support. In the safety briefing on an aeroplane passengers are advised to put on their own air pressure safety masks before putting on their children's. The safety mask is a helpful way to think about how adults and carers support children when someone has died.
- Parents often say they will put their own grief on hold in order to support their children. This isn't helpful to the adult and can give mixed messages to the children about managing grief. It's important to make time for your own feelings of grief and to take care of yourself. You may find it helpful to get your own support through a grief counselling charity such as Cruse Bereavement Care (www.oxfordcruse.co.uk).
- Be realistic about what you can do and cope with one day at a time. Not making time for your own needs may mean you are unavailable to meet your children's



Frequently asked questions

SeeSaw is a service for families living in Oxfordshire. Where a family lives outside the county we can offer telephone advice and direct families to organisations covering the area they live in.

Who does SeeSaw work with?

Seesaw supports children up to the age of 18 years when a parent or sibling has died or is dying. Generally the death of a parent or sibling has more impact on children and young people than the death of another family member or friend. However, we recognise that grandparents or other relatives can be significant figures and SeeSaw will offer telephone support in these situations. We will always make an assessment based on individual circumstances to work out what type of support is most appropriate.

How can I refer my child to SeeSaw?

After a bereavement families can contact us directly and ask for support. We ask for the family to make the contact rather than a professional. When someone is dying the palliative care team around the family may make contact with us to refer them, with the family's permission. Older young people can refer themselves, but we prefer to have the permission of their parents/carers if possible.

Will I have to wait for support after a death?

SeeSaw often offers advice and information to families immediately after a death. Families often have questions about what to say to children and whether children should be included in the funeral. And depending on the nature of the death there may be an inquest or police investigation, which can be very stressful. In the early stages we offer to listen, explain what to expect in terms of children's reactions and advise parents on what to look out for and how to respond. We will often suggest that the family can return for support and advice at any stage.

Does SeeSaw support children under five years old?

We offer advice and support to parents and nursery and school staff on how to talk to young children about death and dying and what is a 'normal' reaction for their stage of development. Generally, children under five haven't yet reached the stage of development where they understand what death means and the impact a death will have on their life. Because of this we don't usually offer direct work with children of this age.



How do you work with children and young people after someone has died?

The work we do with children is child led and involves a mixture of talking, guided activities, exploration of feelings, memory work and resilience building. Following an assessment visit by one of Seesaw's clinical team, where the needs of the child and the family are discussed, we may offer 1:1 work with the child in the family home. Our team of specially trained volunteers does much of our 1:1 work with children and young people.

Depending on the age of the child and the nature of the death we may work with them in different ways. Often when a significant person has died when a child is very young they feel they don't have a sense of that person and they don't have many memories. We may work with them individually to capture the memories they do have and work with the wider family to support the memory work. Sometimes a child may not have an understanding of how someone died, and why, and may need help to reconstruct the 'story' to make sense of it. Some young people may feel stuck or lost and need help to express their feelings and to identify some strategies for managing them and forming a support network. Some may just need the reassurance that how they feel is ok, while some may want to focus on how their life has changed since their parent or sibling has died, and how they can adjust to it.

Do you run groups for families?

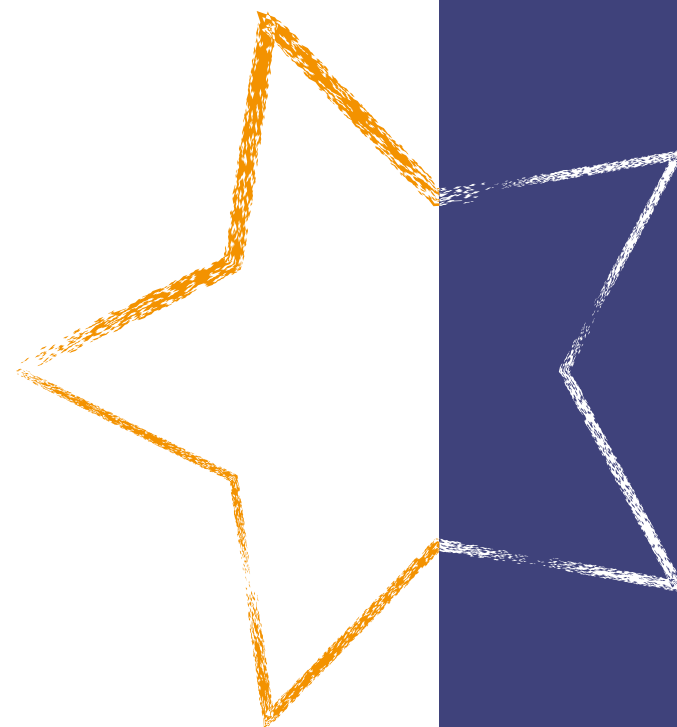
SeeSaw recognises that it can feel isolating when you have a family member who has died. It can help to know that your family isn't the only one to have gone through that experience. Because of this we offer two or three family events each year as an opportunity for families to get together, do some activities and make connections.

Is there a charge?

Our service is always free to families.



For more information on our service and frequently asked questions please visit our website.



Seesaw works closely with children and their families to help them learn to live in a world where someone they love has died.

We provide:

- **telephone consultation** with any parent or professional who is concerned about a bereaved child
- **visits to families** to assess their needs and discuss how SeeSaw might be able to help
- **specially trained support workers** who can meet with the child or young person at home to help them explore the impact the bereavement is having on their lives and find ways of coping
- **specialist support** for families and professionals when a parent or sibling is dying
- **group activities** that enable children and young people and families to meet together in a fun and relaxed way
- **information and training** for school staff who are supporting a bereaved child in the classroom or managing a death in the school community
- **training, consultancy and resources** for professionals who work with bereaved children and young people



Grief support for
children and young people
in Oxfordshire

SeeSaw

Bush House
2 Merewood Avenue
Oxford OX3 8EF

Enquiries and advice line:
01865 744768

Email: info@seesaw.org.uk

www.seesaw.org.uk

Registered charity no 1076321

Registered company no 3790965

Published October 2019