



# What happens when someone dies?

A BOOK FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN TO SHARE TOGETHER

### About SeeSaw

SeeSaw offers bereavement support to families in Oxfordshire both before and after someone significant has died. We offer one-to-one tailored support to children and young people, often working with the whole family and sometimes bringing small groups of children and young people together. SeeSaw also offers support and training to schools and other professionals in Oxfordshire.

For more information, visit [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

### About the author

Jenny Armstrong started working for SeeSaw in 2003, firstly as a volunteer support worker and then, from 2006, as a clinical member of staff with special responsibility for organising group activities for families. During her time at SeeSaw Jenny has supported a large number of children and families as well as training volunteers and other professionals.

Jenny has worked with children throughout her working life, firstly as a primary school teacher in mainstream education as well as working with children with special needs. For 13 years she was the Children's Adviser for the diocese of Oxford, during which time she ran a large number of conferences and training programmes as well as writing several children's books and resources.

"This is *exactly* the book I would have treasured when my dad died. My son Conor was 4 at the time and barely able to understand life let alone how his much loved grandfather could die so suddenly. Even though I knew from my work with bereaved children that I needed to give him the *choice* of viewing his body and attending the funeral, I felt lost on how to make that choice mean something to a 4-year-old. A visual resource like this will make it so much easier for children to make informed choices at such a confusing and overwhelming time for the whole family. Crucially, Jenny gives parents really practical ideas to ensure a child feels included and involved when someone who is important to them has died."

Julie Stokes OBE, Consultant Clinical Psychologist – Founder Patron, Winston's Wish







# What happens when someone dies?

A BOOK FOR ADULTS AND CHILDREN TO SHARE TOGETHER

Written by Jenny Armstrong

Photography by Christine LeHeup

With special thanks to S & R Childs Funeral Services



## How to use this book

**When someone special 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 special person is now.**

The book is aimed at adults and children aged 3–11 years, or children with special needs. It is written with a general explanation of what happens when someone dies, irrespective of belief, be it Christian or no faith at all. The book does not include details of rituals and practices of other religions.

We have written this book for those who are supporting children at this difficult time, to help adults to explain to children in simple language and pictures what happens when someone dies, as well as offering ideas to think and talk about together.

Here are some suggestions on how to explore the themes together.

- Read through the book first so that you are familiar with the contents. Be aware that you may be grieving too so you may find it difficult to look at some of the pictures at this time.
- What we know is that children respond best to clear and honest explanations – avoid euphemisms like ‘gone away’, ‘gone to sleep’, ‘lost’ and so on. It is less confusing for children if they hear and use the word ‘died’.

- Work through the book slowly at a time when there aren't a lot of other distractions. It's worth remembering that children will hop in and out of their grief so you don't need to do it all in one go. You may want to just use particular bits of the book as a way to explain and respond to the questions children are asking.
- There are separate sections to describe a burial or cremation so choose the relevant pages to talk about. Use the ideas in the stars as triggers for further conversations about what will be happening in your particular situation.
- If the children ask a question, this means that they are usually ready for an answer although you may need to respond in an age-appropriate way. Sometimes it will help you to hear what the children are really asking – and what they are already thinking – if you respond to their questions by saying “That's a really good question, I wonder what **you** think?”
- Although children will often ask lots of questions in the early days, some of these questions may not come until after the funeral. This book can therefore be used before or after the funeral, whenever the time is right.

At the back of this book we suggest some further simple guidelines about how to explain death to children.



# Inside this book...



6

What happens when someone dies?



9

Can I see the body?



10

What does a coffin look like?



13

What is a funeral?



15

Hearse



16

Pall bearers



17

Mourners and wreaths



18

What happens to the coffin?



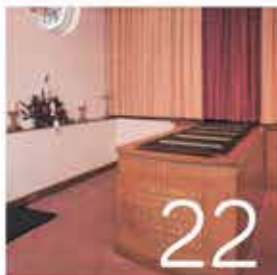
19

Burial



20

Graveyard, grave and headstone



22

Cremation



25

The ashes, urns and caskets



26

The wake or funeral reception



28

Remembering



30

# What happens when someone dies?

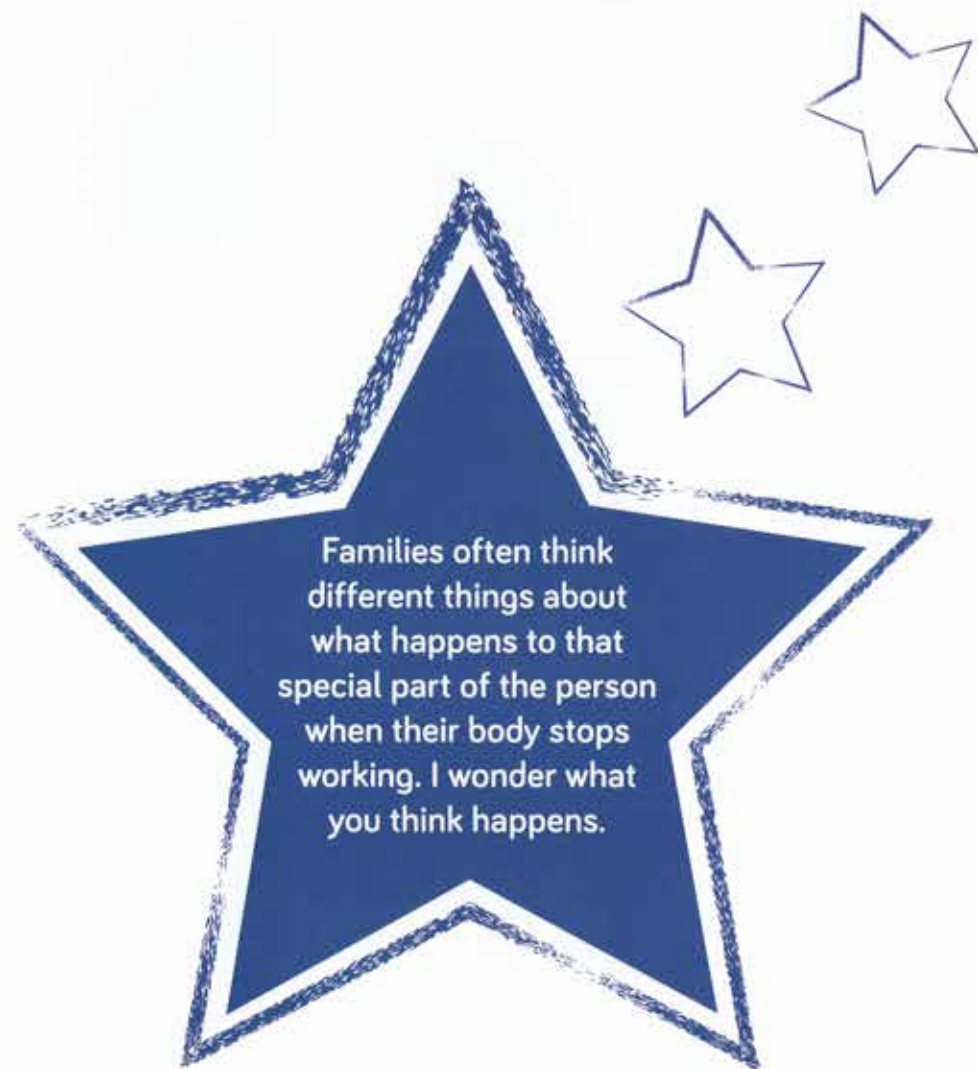
When someone dies their body stops working.

They don't feel anything any more like pain or hot or cold.

They don't need to eat or drink anything.

Their body is a bit like **an empty shell**.

All that made the person so very special –  
like their smile, the little things they did and said –  
are what we remember and these things will stay with us forever!



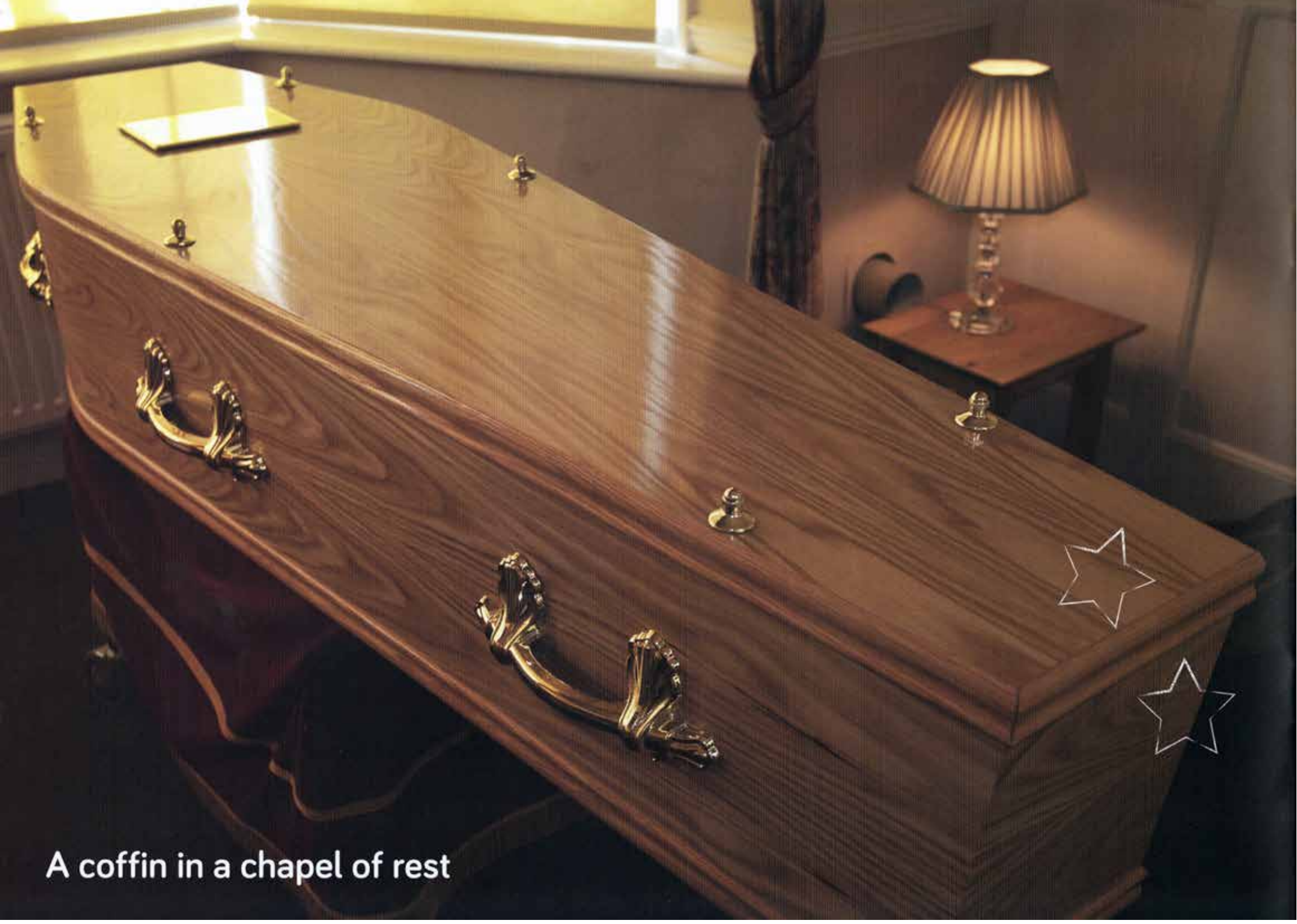
Families often think  
different things about  
what happens to that  
special part of the person  
when their body stops  
working. I wonder what  
you think happens.





An empty shell





A coffin in a chapel of rest





A funeral director

# Can I see the body?

Sometimes people want to go and see the body of their special person, although this is not always possible.

The body will feel quite cold because it is not working any more.

The skin may look a bit different.

The body will usually be looked after by someone called **a funeral director**.

The body may be seen in a room called the **chapel of rest**.

The room will often be cool and quiet and there will only be your special person's body in there.

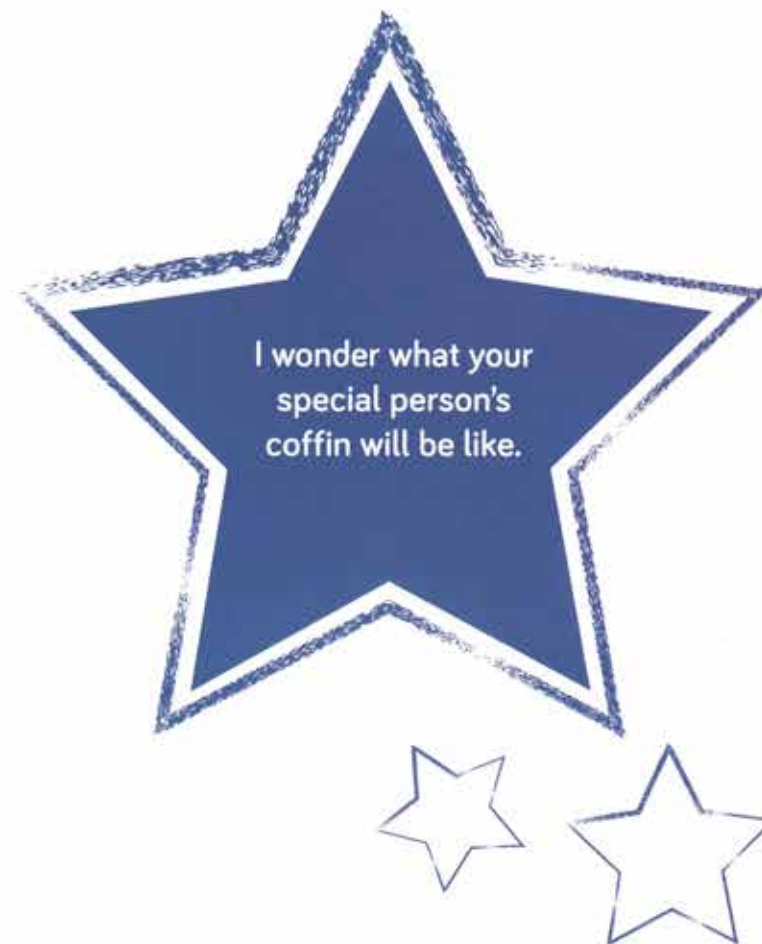


# What does a coffin look like?

The body will be in a special box called a **coffin**.

Coffins are usually made of wood or willow. They can be plain or have bright pictures painted on them.

Sometimes the person who has died will have been dressed in their best or favourite clothes or have a special cloth over them.







A coffin



# Coffin

You could draw a picture, write a letter or send a photograph or toy to put in the coffin with your special person.





Inside a church



A crematorium

# What is a funeral?

A **funeral** is the time for family and friends to come together to remember and to say goodbye to the person who has died.

They may meet in a church, chapel, cemetery, crematorium or other special place.

Where is your  
special person's  
funeral going  
to be?





You may see people crying at the funeral because they are feeling very sad that the person has died, but that is OK!

During the funeral there may be a special service. This is sometimes called a **memorial service**.

This is when people read poems, play the person's favourite music or sing hymns.

Someone may tell stories about what the special person was like. This is called a **tribute** or **eulogy**.

You might like to help choose the music or even say something about your special person during the service.

Lots of strange words are used at a funeral. I wonder how many of these words you know...

- ☐ Hearse
- ☐ Pall bearers
- ☐ Mourners
- ☐ Wreaths

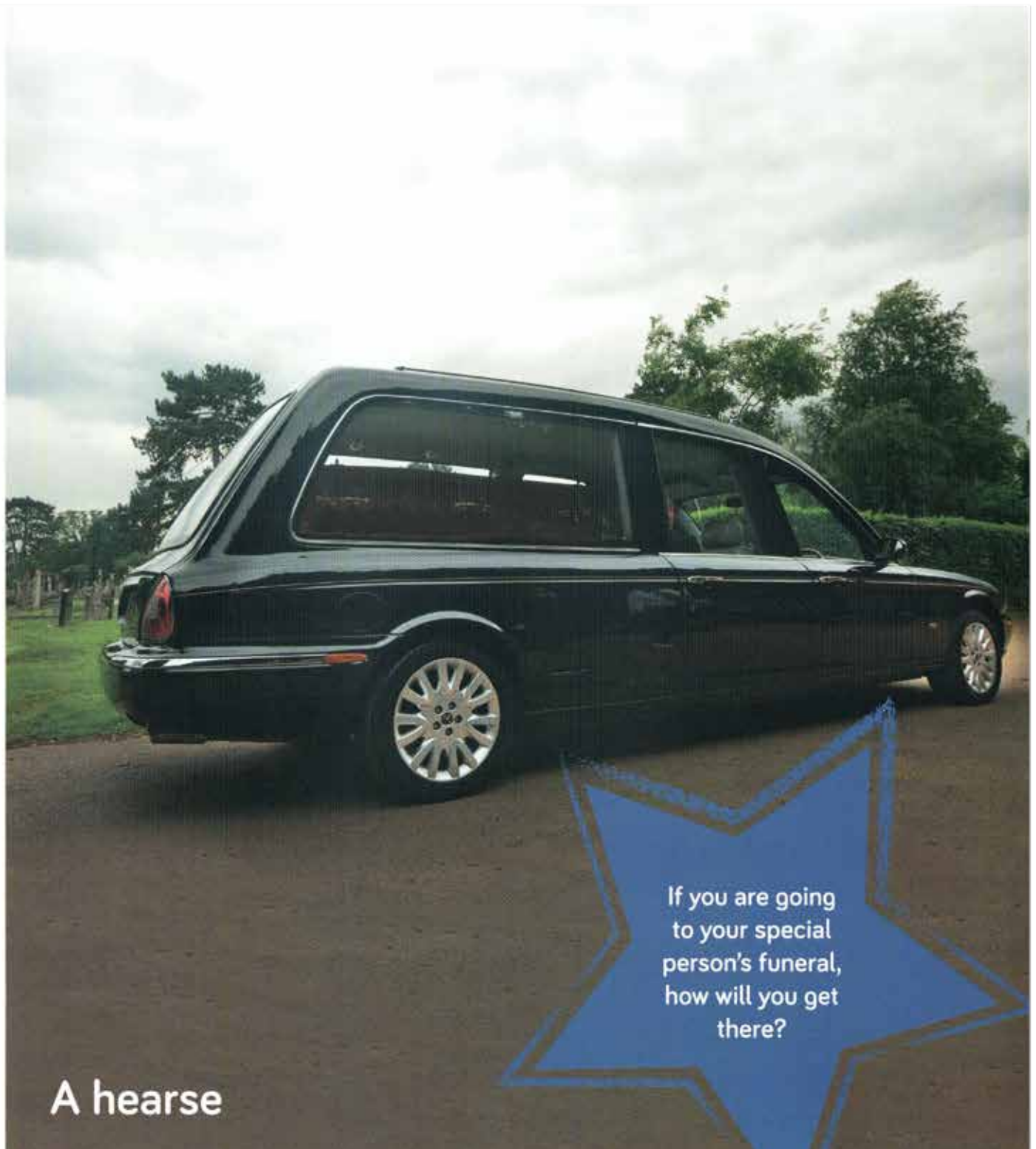
# What does it all mean?



## Hearse

A **hearse** is a special car that takes the coffin to the church, chapel, cemetery or crematorium.

A hearse



If you are going  
to your special  
person's funeral,  
how will you get  
there?





Pall bearers



## Pall bearers

The men who drive the car and carry the coffin are called **pall bearers**.

Sometimes members of the family or special friends help to carry the coffin.



## Mourners

This is the name sometimes given to people who are feeling very sad after someone they love has died.

Sometimes people wear black clothes for a funeral but not always. What colour clothes will people wear to your special person's funeral?



What message might you write about your special person who died?

## Wreaths

These are the flowers that people place on the coffin or the grave. They often have a card on them with a special message to say how much they loved the person who has died.



# What happens to the coffin?

After the funeral service the coffin will either be **buried** or **cremated**.

To find out what happens when the coffin is going to be buried, read on.

If the coffin is going to be cremated, turn to page 22.





# Burial

If the coffin is going to be **buried**, it will be taken to the **graveyard** or **cemetery** where the coffin will be lowered into the ground.





A graveyard



## Graveyard

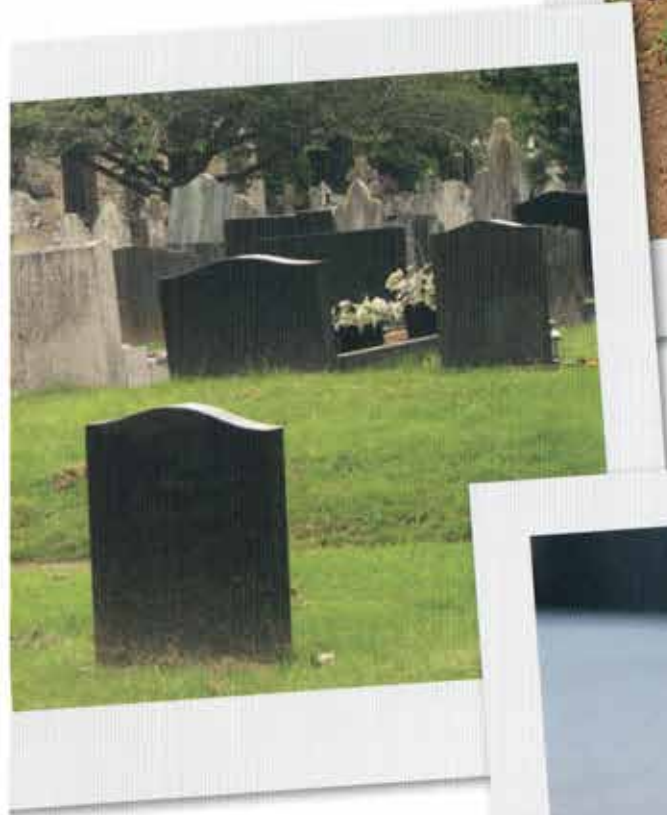
Before the funeral, gravediggers will dig a hole big enough for the coffin to fit in. This is called a **grave**.





## The grave

Family and friends can put flowers on **the grave**.



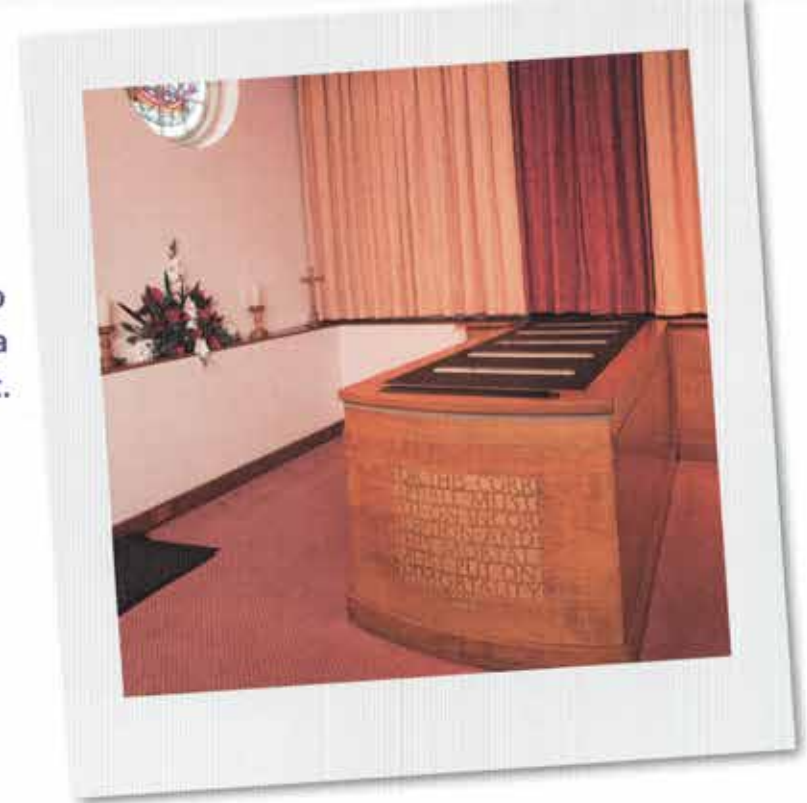
If you go to the graveyard you will see all different shapes of headstones, sometimes called gravestones. I wonder what it will say on your special person's headstone.

## Headstone

Several months later they may put a **headstone** on the grave saying who was buried there.



The coffin is often brought into the crematorium and put onto a special stand at the front.



The coffin is put in the hot fire after everyone has gone home so you can't see it, but remember that the body can't feel anything any more so it doesn't hurt.

## Cremation

If the coffin is going to be **cremated**, it will be taken to a **crematorium**. That is where the coffin is cremated which means that the coffin is put in a very very hot fire which turns it into ashes.



Inside a crematorium





A crematorium garden

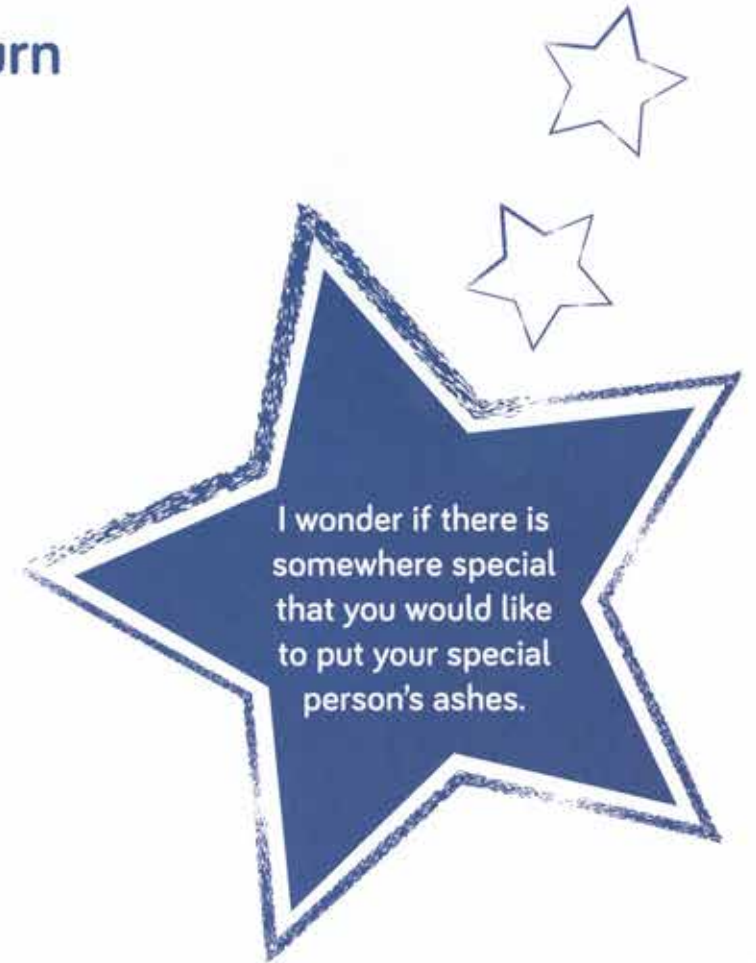




An urn



A casket



I wonder if there is somewhere special that you would like to put your special person's ashes.

## The ashes

The **ashes** are collected and put into an **urn** or **casket**. They can either be put in a special place in the **crematorium garden** or given to the family to be sprinkled or buried somewhere that was important to the person.





# The wake or funeral reception

After the funeral service family and friends will often gather together for a drink and something to eat.

This is the chance for people to talk and remember the person who has died.

They will often tell funny stories and the tears may turn to laughter.

Sometimes this is called a party or a **wake**, and it is OK to play games and have fun with any cousins or friends who might also be at the funeral.



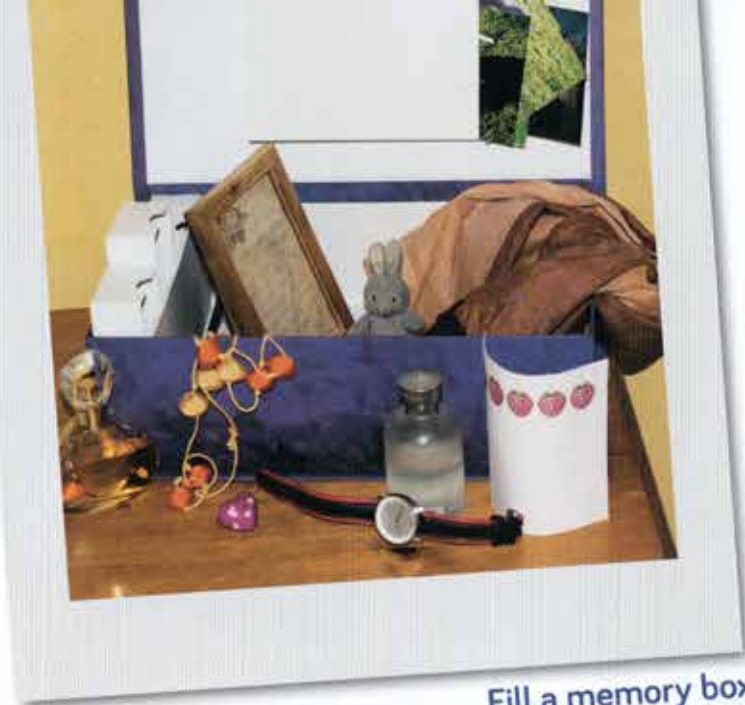
I wonder what  
family or friends  
will be at your  
special person's  
funeral party.







**Plant a tree**



**Fill a memory box**

# Remembering

Even after the funeral you may still feel very sad that your special person has died. There are lots of things you can do to remember the special times you had with them. Here are a few ideas to get you started...

You might like to put some special things into **a memory box**, like photographs, the order of service from the funeral, any cards you might have received. You might also add their favourite CD or DVD, their aftershave or perfume, hats or scarves, anything that reminds you of them.

Some people like to **plant a tree** or rose bush in memory of their special person.

You could make a special **photograph album** or e-book of pictures on the computer.

I wonder what you  
would like to do  
to remember your  
special person.





Best of all you can just sit  
and talk to other people  
who knew and loved your  
special person too!



## For adults: A brief guide to supporting bereaved children

**This book is designed to help adults and children talk together about what happens when someone dies.** The photographs and text give clear, simple explanations. This visual simplicity may also be useful if working with children with learning disabilities who may respond more easily to concrete explanations. At the same time, the book offers reflective questions as triggers for further discussions about a family's particular experience.

When someone in a family dies, it can be a devastating time for everyone. Adults often want to protect children from the pain felt when the person dies and so either shield them from the truth or exclude them altogether. Some people still believe that the less we talk about the death the quicker the children will forget, but evidence shows that this can cause all kinds of resentment or confusion later on.

What we know is that children manage the situation better when they are told clearly and honestly what has happened in age-appropriate language. Often, because it is so sad, adults try to soften what has

happened by using euphemisms instead of saying openly that the person has died. This can be particularly confusing for young children who think very literally. If they are told that granny has gone to sleep, they may become afraid of bedtime. If they are told that we have lost granny, they may wonder why no-one is looking for her. These words and others like them can just confuse children.

Little children struggle with the permanence of death and will often ask when granny is coming back or, if they are told that she is in heaven, will ask if they can go and see her. Children have active imaginations and if they feel they are not being told the truth they may conjure up a story that is even more frightening.

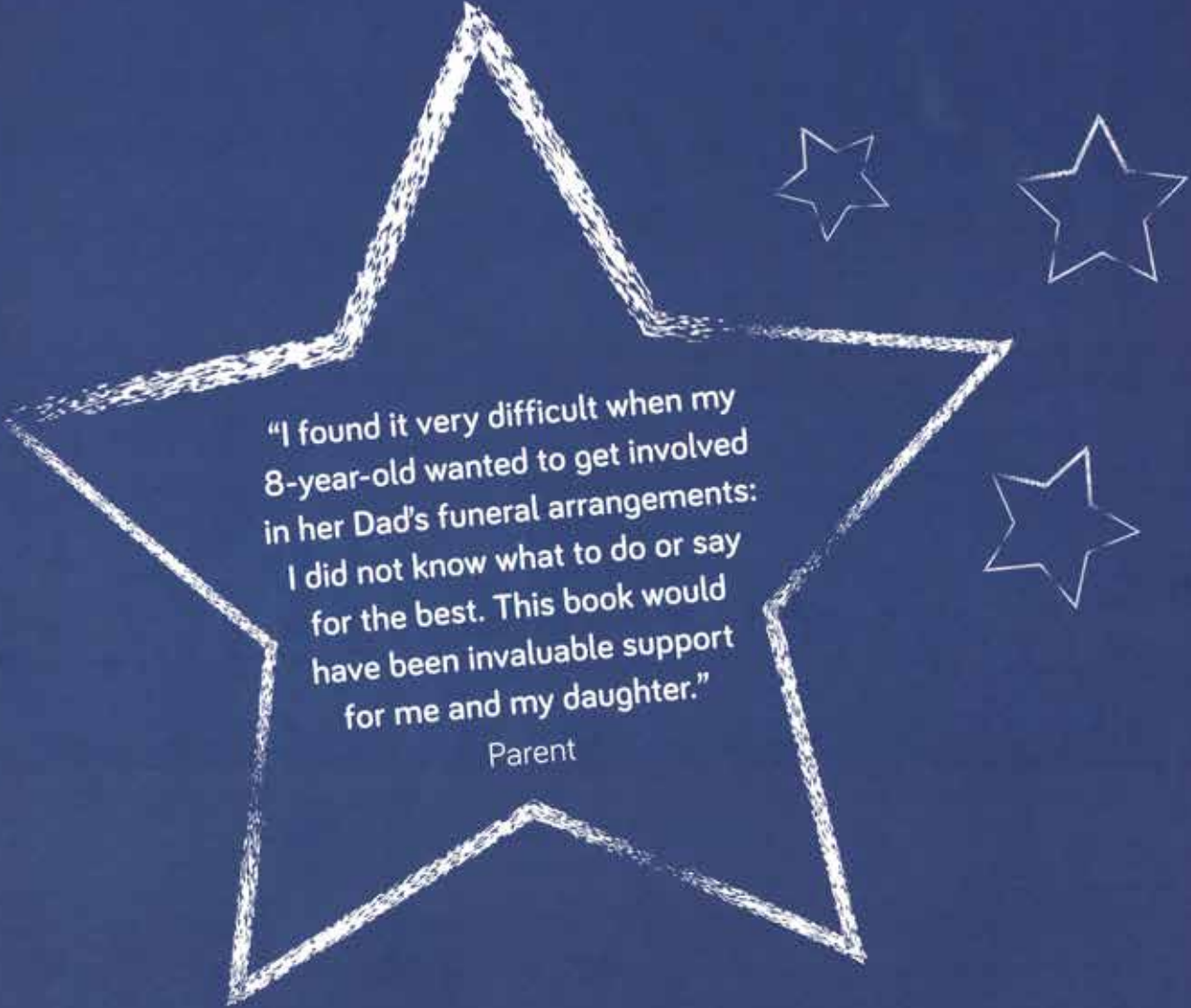
Children will often hop in and out of their grief, one moment being in floods of tears and the next asking what is for tea. This doesn't mean they are not grieving, but just trying to muddle through a heap of questions and emotions that can be very frightening. For this reason children need lots of reassurance that what they

are feeling is normal and they also need encouragement to share those feelings and talk about the person who has died.

It is not unusual for children to become very worried about other people in their family dying and so become very clingy or anxious, particularly when separated or at bedtime.

We know that everyone grieves differently and children and young people are no exception. Children who are normally quiet and thoughtful may become even more withdrawn. Children who are normally noisy and asking lots of questions will continue in their quest to understand what death is all about. It will help if children feel able to talk about the person who has died and not be afraid of crying together with others.

Building memories – for example, through photographs, drawings, memory boxes and so on – will help children come to terms with their sadness and also remind them of special times with the person who has died.



"I found it very difficult when my  
8-year-old wanted to get involved  
in her Dad's funeral arrangements:  
I did not know what to do or say  
for the best. This book would  
have been invaluable support  
for me and my daughter."

Parent



When someone special 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 special person is now.

We have written this book for those who are supporting children at this difficult time, to help adults to explain to children in simple language and pictures what happens when someone dies, as well as offering ideas to think and talk about together.



© SeeSaw 2014  
Published February 2014

SeeSaw  
Bush House  
2 Merewood Avenue  
Headington  
Oxford OX3 8EF

Enquiries and advice line: 01865 744 768  
Email: [info@seesaw.org.uk](mailto:info@seesaw.org.uk)  
[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)

Charity registration number: 1076321