



## Supporting bereaved children & young people with SEND

When we communicate with any child, we must consider their level of understanding and stage of development rather than their chronological age. Every child is unique. Some children's ages and stages of development are close together. But in other children, there may be a bigger distance between the two. This is especially true when talking to children who have special education needs or learning disabilities. And because all children are unique, there isn't a "one size fits all" approach. However, broadly speaking, there are a few principles that we would suggest are helpful when speaking to a child with special educational needs or disabilities about a death.

### Communication

Before we start to communicate with them, we need to ensure the child is comfortable with the surroundings and your proximity. Sit next to them rather than directly opposite and avoid standing when they are seated. Be conscious of their comfort around eye contact and avoid prolonged or direct contact if they are uncomfortable with it.

Choose concrete language and real words. By that we mean you should avoid euphemisms or metaphors such as "gone to sleep" or "lost" instead of dead or died. Don't rely solely on verbal communication. If they normally use, or prefer to use, language symbols or social stories for example, it is important that you choose this mode of communication.

Provide any information you need to give them in small chunks, at their level of understanding. Be prepared to repeat the information or answer questions honestly many times if they need or ask it, and allow enough questions and processing time for them to understand what you are saying.

Accept and normalise any feelings or reactions they may have, even if they seem unexpected, such as laughing. Be prepared for your child to appear disinterested or unaffected but also be ready for difficult or unusual questions.

### What can help?

Your child will benefit from maintaining familiar and regular routines as much as possible. This helps them to feel safe, which in turn helps with emotion and behaviour regulation. If your child has autism, you will know already that preparation is important. When someone dies, this can include visiting the funeral venue or meeting with the funeral director or person officiating in advance.





We need to remain conscious of any sensory difficulties they may have and prepare them for what they may see, hear, smell, or feel, including things such as the smell of flowers, or the hardness of a pew or bench. We should be flexible and manage expectations around the clothing they will wear on the day and be conscious of allowing them their soothing items that help them to keep calm.

A death in the family can cause anxiety in all children but may be heightened in children with learning difficulties, and especially in children with autism. This might make it difficult for them to concentrate and carry out their usual daily activities, whether that is taking a shower or doing their homework. They might need a gentle and empathetic reminder to do these things.

If your child is struggling with separation anxiety, provide them with a transitional object from home or a photograph of their loved one to be used in school to provide comfort. For a sensory connection, you may want to spray the perfume or aftershave of the person who died onto a comfort blanket.

### **Be prepared**

Be prepared that pre-occupations or repetitive behaviours can increase as they are often performed as a coping mechanism. There may also be some regression in behaviour which you should accept as a way of communicating distress. This should settle as time passes. A child with special educational needs or disabilities can have a delayed emotional reaction to a bereavement and might express their grief at any time or in any place, which can be unexpected.

Letting your child's school keyworker or TA, or any other adults who care for them, know what has happened and how your child might react can help them to provide appropriate support and make these occurrences easier to manage for your child. They can also continue with the same phrasing and messaging you are providing which will help your child with processing the death.

Ultimately, your child will learn how to manage their grief and their emotions from you, so, if you can, model managing your own emotions for them and be sure to look yourself.

**For further guidance and advice in supporting bereaved children,  
please visit our website: [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)**

