

Coronavirus (COVID-19) summary information:

Bereavement, loss and funerals

Compiled by the Educational Psychology Service with specific content from & signposting to:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org>

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Supporting bereaved children through difficult times

Frightening events widely reported in the media, such as the coronavirus pandemic, can cause children to worry about themselves and others.

It is normal for children to feel unsettled when something scary is happening or has happened, and many will be upset, sad or fearful at times. Children who have been, or are, bereaved are likely to show a stronger reaction and may worry that they or someone they know will die.

Here are some ideas to help you support a bereaved child:

Talk

Children and young people often find it helpful if they can talk about what is happening, helping them to make sense of events and feel less afraid.

Even young children are likely to hear reports in the media or overhear adults talking about deaths due to coronavirus, or the risk of death from becoming ill with the virus.

It's important to talk about their fears or anxieties honestly and openly in age-appropriate language.

It may also help to restrict the amount of media coverage and social media they are exposed to, and balance this with other activities and positive things to focus on.

Children's understanding of death varies with their stage of development and it can be helpful to understand why children may respond differently.

The website (<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>) has information which can help you understand and accommodate these differences and you may find it useful to watch our short guidance film: "Children's understanding of death at different ages"

Be honest

Give children honest, factual information in language appropriate to their age and level of understanding and be guided by their questions.

Children tend to pick up when questions are avoided and may then imagine all kinds of things, causing further anxiety.

It's not necessary to go into detail but it will be helpful to explain things that affect them directly, such as why they are being asked to wash their hands regularly and how the virus is spread, why their school has closed, why they can't visit a grandparent or why a parent is working from home.

Acknowledge concerns

Bereaved children may be concerned about someone they know becoming ill or even dying. Explain that some people will have no symptoms and will be fine, most people will experience only a mild form of the virus and will get better, but some people are more vulnerable and so we need to make sure they are protected.

Be honest though and don't shy away from explaining that some people may die, as children need to trust that you are being honest and open, so that they can ask you other questions with confidence.

Create routines

Currently, keeping to usual, daily routines might be difficult. But routines can be reassuring to children when everything else seems to be disrupted. If you are at home with your child, try to keep to regular routines such as meal-times, school work, breaks, play and bedtime.

Children feel more in control, and therefore less fearful, if given simple clear jobs to do, such as washing their hands properly, or simple jobs around the house.

Get support

If you are struggling with your own reactions, try to get support for yourself. Children and young people are quick to pick up on the distress of others around them, even if the adults are trying to hide their feelings.

For guidance on supporting a bereaved child, please contact Child Bereavement UK:

Helpline: 0800 02 888 40

Live Chat via [childbereavementuk.org](https://www.childbereavementuk.org)

Email: support@childbereavementuk.org
9am-5pm, Monday-Friday (except Bank Holidays)

Guidance for bereaved families

If you have any concerns or queries, please contact your bereavement support practitioner in the usual way, or email support@childbereavementuk.org

CORONAVIRUS: HOW TO SAY GOODBYE WHEN A FUNERAL ISN'T POSSIBLE **WINSTONSWISH.ORG**

The restrictions and safety measures introduced in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic will affect practices around funerals and funeral homes in the coming months. We have put together below some guidance for talking to children about funerals in this period.

Should children attend funerals?

At Winston's Wish, we recognise that your children are your children; you know their individual needs, worries, strengths. Our guidance and suggestions are always offered in that context, and based on what we have learnt from listening to and supporting thousands of children and young people across the years.

We have spoken to children who chose to attend the funeral of someone important and were glad they did. We have spoken to children who chose not to attend and had no regrets. We have never spoken to a child who attended a funeral and wished they hadn't... but we have spoken to so very many who did not attend and deeply regret it.

Children may also want to see the body of the person who died: to say a final goodbye, to begin to understand the reality of death, to express their loved one last time.

How has coronavirus affected funerals?

The national response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak means that children and young people who have a loved one die in this period probably won't have the chance to make the choices they normally could.

Advice around funerals is constantly changing, you can find the latest advice here:
<https://nafd.org.uk/funeral-advice/>

At the least, we understand that the number of people attending a funeral will be kept to the absolute minimum and that distancing rules will be enforced.

At the moment, members of the same household who have been socially isolated together are likely to be able to attend a funeral. Different rules affect viewing the body of the person who died at a funeral home. It is likely that these arrangements will become more restricted in coming weeks.

The most important thing that parents and carers can do is to reduce the impact these enforced changes have on children's experiences. A good start is to acknowledge that things will need to be different but will still be full of meaning and depth.

"Because of this outbreak of the virus, lots of things are having to change. As you know, schools are mainly closed and I'm now working from home. One of the things that has changed is how we can hold a funeral."

What about memorial services?

Some people are already planning to hold memorial services at a later date for people who die during this period. A memorial service can be planned slowly, with input from children and young people, and can provide a helpful opportunity to remember and celebrate the person who lived (as well as mourn the person who died). This also gives people time to jot down a few memories and stories on postcards or Post-It notes or share electronically and to find some old photographs to bring to share with children – either then or at a later time.

Can I attend the funeral of someone who died because of coronavirus?

If the person died due to coronavirus (COVID-19), it is likely that all procedures around the funeral home and the funeral itself will be tightly restricted and there will be no choices around children's participation and the whole procedure may seem rather impersonal and clinical.

What if children and young people can't see the body?

If the family and the child wanted to see the body of the person who died, but this is not possible because of the new rules in response to coronavirus (COVID-19), there are some alternatives that can help.

For example, if one person can attend, they can explain in detail to the children what the person looks like and where their body is being looked after. If no-one is allowed to attend, a funeral director can describe the surroundings to an adult to then share with children.

"Granny's body was lying very peacefully on a table. The room was painted pale green and there was a vase of flowers beside her. Her skin felt cold but otherwise she looked just like Granny did when she was alive."

A child or young person may want to send in a card to be laid beside the person, or an object of significance, for example, a toy, a flower or a drawing. Funeral directors can also personalise the closed casket with, for example, a photograph of the deceased.

What if children can't attend the funeral?

If the child or young person is not able to attend the funeral, there are several ways to still make the experience special and deeply meaningful.

"Because of all the changes being made to keep people safe and prevent this virus spreading too far, we won't all be able to go to Grandpa's funeral. However, we've had a think and have some ideas on how you can still be part of it..."

If only a couple of people from the same household can attend the funeral in person, children and young people can follow the same order of service from home. This could be at the same time, or later when the relative who attend the funeral can share what happened as the family follows the service together.

Some places of worship and crematoria are live streaming funerals so people can watch online from home.

It may be that family members cannot be in the same location but want to be together for the funeral so you could video call each other.

Photographs can be taken to show children and young people to help them understand what happens at a funeral. Photographs that are helpful include: the outside of the place where the funeral is being held; the hearse; the coffin (or equivalent); any flowers or decoration; the interior of the place (with permission).

Keepsakes from the funeral service can be very meaningful for children. For example, some flowers from the tributes to press and keep; a leaf from one of the trees in the grounds; a pebble from the surrounding area; the order of service.

Children can participate by contributing to some of the choices within the ceremony. For example, they could choose a piece of music, select a poem, or suggest flowers.

Children could write and/or draw cards to be placed on or in the coffin or choose a toy or something meaningful to be placed with the person's body.

They could also write a tribute to the person who died which can be read by the person taking the service or by whoever is able to attend.

Funeral arrangers and celebrants will do all they can to continue to make funerals as personal as possible; they might be able, for example, to dress in bright colours, wear a football shirt, have a special flower in their buttonhole. Coffins may still be able to be personalised.

"I know you wanted to say something about Dad. I wonder if we could write down together what you would want to say and then I or Uncle Harry will read it for you as part of the service".

How can friends and family help a bereaved child or young person?

The wider family and friends may be feeling especially helpless to support the bereaved family from a distance. As well as sending thoughts and keeping in touch, sharing memories of the person who died is a practical and important way to help. These can be shared at the time of the funeral and also kept as a store of memories for the children to explore over time.

Here's a starter that could, be emailed or sent to friends and family on social media as a suggestion for ideas:

To all the family and friends of _____ (first name of deceased),

I knew them when _____ (eg we worked at the shop; we played football etc etc)

I will always remember _____ (some general observations eg their generosity, terrible jokes etc)

In particular, I remember _____ (specific memory eg the day we missed the bus and walked; she taught me to swim)

They were good at _____ (eg doing something or having a special quality)

Always know that _____

Thinking of you at this time,
_____ (name and contact details if possible)

Winstonswish.org

Although wider family and friends may not be able to attend a funeral they may still want to honour and remember a loved one by creating an online tribute fund. You can set up an online tribute fund to remotely post pictures, videos or music, light a candle or share memories. For more information please visit our [Tributes page](#).

What about observing faith and cultural practices during the coronavirus pandemic?

It will be particularly difficult for children and young people whose culture or faith requires certain practices to be performed in particular ways for the person who has died. Churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship are closed to the public although faith leaders can still conduct services in places such as a crematorium or graveside.

Children and young people may believe that their loved one has not been treated appropriately and may need reassurance, using the language of faith, that everything that is being done is respectful and necessary.

How might children and young people react?

Alongside all of the tumbling, sharp feelings of grief a child or young person will be feeling because someone important has died, will be added feelings of confusion and frustration because, at the present time, there can't be a traditional funeral. Young people may feel they are letting down a relative or friend if they are not present at the funeral. Younger children may find it even harder to understand what has happened without the chance of observing the funeral.