

Finding new ways for children to say goodbye



Developed in partnership with our Irish Childhood Bereavement Network.

In normal times, when someone is very unwell, we would encourage parents to allow children take part in opportunities to say goodbye to loved ones in any way they feel comfortable. Children and young people are usually very involved in a family member's final days, in our end-of-life goodbyes and funeral traditions.

It helps them understand the finality of death and it shows them how to give and receive compassion. Children often like to feel they have contributed to the care of the person and can often take a lot of comfort in the future for being part of little acts of kindness in the care of their sick relative.

During these exceptional times, however, it might not be possible to take part in our normal end-of-life and funeral practices. Infection controls may mean family members do not have an opportunity to spend time with someone who is dying, to say goodbye or attend funerals.



Children will need a lot of reassurance and love during these distressing times. They need to know that even though the adults around them are worried and very sad, they will still be able to care for them. They may also feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings.

Children may worry they have not been as good at following the measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 or they may hear things in the media about how children are vectors playing a role in spreading the virus. These anxieties will be worse if someone close to them dies.

Young children may blame themselves in some way for the death. It is normal for primary school aged children to engage in 'magical thinking', this means they can invent explanations in their heads about why bad things have happened.

When a loved one is dying

For children and young people who have a relative who is dying, the restrictions can mean they will not be able to spend time with their dying relative, they may not even be allowed touch or hug them or even be in the same room.

Here are some suggestions for families if children cannot visit at end of life:

- explain the situation to children in a clear and honest way.
- talk them through what is happening and how the person they love is being cared for at the end of their life.

- be prepared to repeat the same information as children may need lots of opportunities to hear what is being said so they can take it in.
- give them as much reassurance as possible without taking away from the truth that it is not an ideal situation for anyone.
- help them prepare for ways to say goodbye – allow them respect to plan it their own way.
- help them express their messages of love through art, poems, music, cards and letters. Allow children to write their own message to the person. If there are a number of children in your household, they may like to do the activity together with siblings but to keep their message private.
- use technology to help children and young people share messages if they wish and talk to loved ones.
- make recording to share at a later stage by way of a digital memory box.
- if it is feasible, set up a video link for an interactive conversation.
- keep them informed but don't pressure them – there is no right or wrong way to say goodbye.

Children may worry that someone else in the family will become sick; reassure them that they will be cared for no matter what happens. We can also reassure that it is hoped no one else in the family will get sick in the same way, but being careful not to promise that no-one will ever get sick again.

When a loved one dies

Breaking bad news

Telling a child about the death of a loved one should take place as early as possible to allow the information to sink in. Then the child can ask questions later on, when they have had time to think.



The best thing is to give them honest, age-appropriate information about the death. It's painful to see a child upset, but children do cope better with sad news when they are told the truth. Helping children understand death and grief will vary depending on the child's age and developmental stage. See our simple guide here; <https://www.childhoodbereavement.ie/families/childrens-grief/>

A good place to start is to check what the child already understands about the person's condition, and the conversation can build from there. Asking children what they understood is a great way to get a sense of how much they have taken in.

Each child will react differently, some may behave as if they have not been told anything, or they may be upset or angry. Some children do not want all the details other may want very specific information. Be guided by the child; let their questions lead the conversation. Don't worry if you haven't got all the answers, let them know you will find out and re-visit the conversation again.

Children are hearing a lot about COVID-19 deaths. If the death does not relate to the virus, it is important that children are given the name of the illness the person has died from. So for example, they should be told that the person is dying from cancer and that they are not dying from COVID-19. It helps to give them a little bit of information about cancer and especially

that it is not an illness that you can catch from another person. This will help to reassure them with their very normal worries.

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Funerals

Funerals also help children feel less isolated as they are part of something they share with other adults and children in their families. Often for children, funerals connect them with extended family members, particularly cousins and relations who are of a similar age. During COVID-19 restrictions, we know our physical contact and possibly children's attendance at funerals may be very limited.

Here are some suggestions for families if children cannot attend the funeral:

- help them pick something that can be laid beside the person, something that has a meaning for them like a toy, a letter, a paper flower, a poem or a drawing.
- 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.
- let children and young people be part of planning the arrangement, they might choose some readings, music and write part of the eulogy.
- consider setting up a 'virtual wake' so children can honour the life of the person by sharing special memories and stories about the person who has died.

- many places are arranging live streaming so you can follow the same order of service from home, dress and prepare as you would as if you were attending in person.
- for adults who can attend, maybe bring home mementos – a flower, leaf, booklet, photo, you might also consider taking some photographs to show children afterwards.
- pick a day or time for everyone to stop for a moment and light a candle in memory of the person.
- respect their views, allow them to express their feeling in their own way, some might want to do this privately other may want to share.
- the COVID-19 restrictions mean children and young people's normal routine is completely changed, they have fewer places to go and connect with people outside their household who normally support them – friends, teachers and wider family.

Remember grief is an ongoing process for adults and children. How they feel will continue to evolve in the coming weeks and months. It may be helpful to let teachers know of a death in the family when children return to school.

They will rely heavily on family support during these hard times, it is important that parents and caregivers, who are also grieving, find ways to get support for themselves.

Mind yourself so you can mind them.

Useful Resources

- The Irish Childhood Bereavement Network. Feel free to contact www.childhoodbereavement.ie
- Barnardos Bereavement Helpline Service. Tel. (01) 473 2110. Available 10am-12pm, Monday to Thursday
- The Children's Grief Centre. Visit www.childrensgriefcentre.ie
- <https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/files/research/how-to-tell-children-that-someone-has-died.pdf>