

Supporting pre-school children who have been bereaved

Younger children and infants feel grief but understand and experience it differently from adults.

Young babies cannot verbalise their grief, but are saddened and unsettled by changes in their routine/carer/surroundings. They can show this through inconsolable crying, being unsettled, sleep disturbances and demonstrating a sad facial response.

Some pre-school children may ask questions and talk about the person who has died, but do not understand the permanence of death. They may seem to have accepted that the person has died and then ask when they are going to see that person.

They may also talk about someone being 'less dead'. Children often know that something is wrong, following a significant bereavement, but don't know quite what has happened. This is why it is important to talk with them - books and stories can also help children to begin to understand the concept of death.



It can be useful to show children a dead insect and compare it to a live insect, to show them that it can't become alive again once it is dead.



Because young children are very literal it is helpful to use clear, concrete language e.g. 'Daddy is dead', rather than 'we have lost Daddy', as they will think that Daddy can be found again. Children may ask the same question repeatedly. This doesn't mean they haven't listened but that they are trying to understand, and this is helping them process what has happened.

Young children will 'puddle jump' i.e. hop in and out of grief. They may ask a question about the person who has died and then ask, 'can I have a biscuit?'. This is very normal and doesn't mean they are not grieving.

Younger children may present as clingier and want to know what time you will be picking them up from nursery/pre-school, or more reluctant to leave you, scared you may not be coming back. These children need more reassurance and time.



It is helpful to explain to children that, when someone you love has died, you can feel lots of big, mixed-up feelings and emotions.

These can include feeling sad, angry, confused, frustrated, cross and lonely. Sometimes these feelings are so big you can't think about anything else.

Explain that sometimes these feelings can make your body feel strange eg tummy ache, headache, tingly fingers etc.

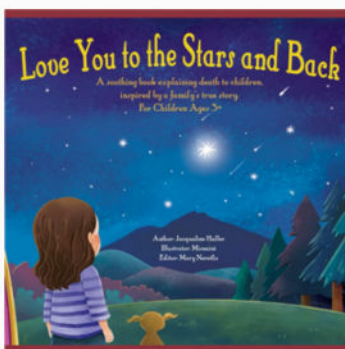
Share that it is ok to have these feelings and that as times goes on, they will start to feel many other feelings again – happiness, excitement etc, and some of those other feelings in their body will disappear over time and that this is OK too.

Talk to your child's nursery/preschool or childminder about the bereavement your child has experienced, so they can take a similar and consistent approach to supporting your child.

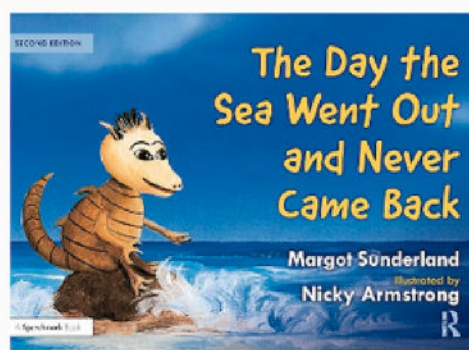


Helpful resources

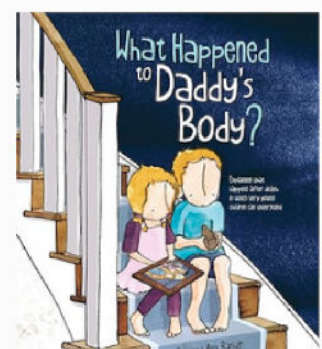
Books are a helpful tool to help younger children understand bereavement.



Love you to the Stars and Back
A soothing book explaining death to children, inspired by a family's true story.
by Jacqueline Haller



The Day the Sea Went Out and Never Came Back. A Story for Children Who Have Lost Someone They Love by Margot Sunderland and Nicky Armstrong.



What Happened to Daddy's Body? Explaining what happens after death in words very young children can understand. By Elke and Alex Barber.

The Colour Monster Paperback

A gentle exploration of feelings for young and old alike. By Anna Llenas (Illustrator)

