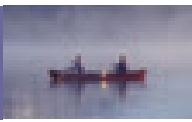


Dealing with sudden death: helping children and adolescents





Due to physical, psychological and emotional development, children in each age group will deal with sudden death in different ways.

EARLY CHILDHOOD (0-5 YEARS)

Child development

Infants and young children are learning to move and understand language for the first time. They depend on you to survive and help them understand the world. They may not understand how they feel or how to tell you about it, but will act out their feelings in other ways. When they are confused about things, they need simple answers. You will need to repeat most explanations to help them remember.

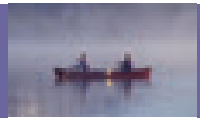
They quickly form emotional bonds with their parents. Your child may become upset if separated from you or other familiar faces, this is a sign that they are capable of grief. They will not understand why they feel this way or know how to talk to you about it.

They use play to build relationships and understand new things. It is an enjoyable way to learn about the world. If your child cannot talk about their emotions or something that confuses them, they will act them out and learn about them through play. This is an important part of their grief.

If your child has a learning disability their understanding may be similar to that of a younger child.

Reactions to sudden death

Young children understand separation – they will usually form strong bonds within the first six months of life. From this point on, separation from you and other familiar faces becomes upsetting for them. They experience death as a



separation. If sudden death affects a family, they will react to the distress of the people around them. The death of a parent will cause them the greatest upset.

They don't understand death – they don't understand that death is final. They may ask when the person who has died is coming back or think they might be lonely under the ground. Telling them that death is like going on a journey or going to sleep will lead to confusion. They need to understand that people cannot come back or wake up after they die.

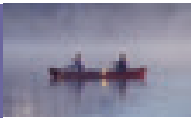
They need to understand what happened – they may ask why the person died, or act out bits of what happened when they are playing (using toys to play different roles). This helps them understand confusing or scary parts of what happened.

They make up their own explanations for what they don't understand – they may secretly think that the person died because of something they did or said (like being angry or naughty). They may also believe that you can make everything go back to the way it was before. They are looking for simple explanations to help make sense of what happened, and will believe these to be true until you help them understand.

Sudden death frightens them – they feel scared and helpless when they are threatened, and worry more about their safety afterwards. If your child is more easily scared or irritated, this is because their bodies react strongly to feeling unsafe or threatened. They will rely on you to calm them down and take their fears seriously.

They will remember what happened – some memories of what happened (or what they think happened) are hard to forget. You will not always know how much your child thinks about these. Some things





that they see, hear, smell, or feel will remind them of what happened. Loud noises or sudden shocks may make them feel unsafe without knowing why. They may think more about what happened at quiet times of the day or night.

They feel stress – if your child feels frightened or unsafe when they think about what happened, they use up energy that would normally be used for play, exercise, or learning. The longer they stay frightened or worried, the more energy they use. Over days and weeks this can be draining for their body and may leave them open to illness or injury.

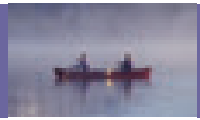
They are stressed by changes in routine – mealtimes, bedtime, naps, play, and pre-school are parts of a child's day that make them feel secure. Sudden death disturbs these routines. Your child will feel safest when they are with you or close family members, and they know what to expect.

They don't think about the future – they may continue playing or not be upset when they hear that someone has died. They do not understand the full consequences of death, and what it will mean to them later. They are likely to think about the death during quieter or less active times like bedtime.

What makes things worse?

Witnessing a sudden death –this is very frightening for your child who will need explanations and reassurance about what happened. They will not understand what has taken place. They will remember in detail many things that they saw, heard, smelled, tasted or felt at the time. This can make them feel very unsafe and stop them coming to terms with what happened.

Not understanding what has happened – your child may think they are responsible in some way for what happened, or that they could have prevented it by doing something differently. They may think the person who died can still see or hear them. They need to be reassured that there is nothing magical about death and that they are not to blame.



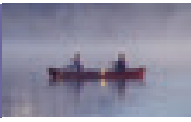
Witnessing uncontrolled emotion – your child will watch and listen closely to your reactions. If you are upset, they will probably become frightened and upset as well. They may be more affected than they seem if they sense excessive anger, sadness or worry in you or another family member. They need to see adult grief and sadness in a safe place where they are free to ask questions.

Hiding what they are feeling – they may hide their feelings because they don't want to think about them or they don't want to upset others. They may not have the words to tell you how they feel. They need to know they can talk to you about their feelings, even if what they have to say is upsetting.

Feeling unsafe – some children feel very unsafe after a sudden death. Involving them in safety routines (e.g. locking doors, checking windows, turning on alarms, leaving a light on at night) can help them feel safer. They need to feel safe at home, pre-school, or at playgroup.

Children with special needs or circumstances

Children with special needs or circumstances will react to sudden death according to their level of understanding. If your child has a learning disability their development may be similar to that of a younger child. They need simple explanations of death and trauma, and encouragement to talk and ask questions. With care and support they will recover.



MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (5-10 YEARS)

Child development

Children between five and ten years of age are learning to understand the world around them. Their language and understanding develop gradually during this time.

They are very good observers – they pay attention to what people do, not what they say, and often work out their own meanings for things. They show what they believe and understand by the questions they ask, or their answers to questions like “what do you think happened”.

They enjoy spending time outside the family at school or with friends. When they become frightened or worried they may want to spend more time close to their family.

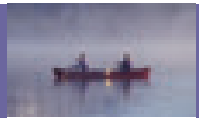
They like rules and want things to be fair. They enjoy playing games but do not like others breaking the rules. They may ask “why me?” or “why my family?” when something goes wrong.

If your child has a learning disability their understanding may be similar to that of a younger child. You may find it helpful to read the guidelines for younger children.

Reactions to sudden death

Children understand separation – they will react when separated from you or the people they spend a lot of time with. They will be upset even if they don't understand what death means or what has happened.

They are beginning to understand death – between the ages of five and seven years, your child will begin to understand that death happens to everyone at some point and that you cannot bring someone from the dead. Before this, they are likely to believe dead people can come back. You need to be aware of how much your child understands death.



They don't think about their own death – they won't like to think about their own death or the death of others around them in a realistic sense.

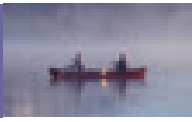
They question what has happened – they may want to know “why me?” or “why my family?” and feel that things are unfair. They may act out what happened in their heads or through play, sometimes changing the story or saving the person who died. This is normal when they are working through something that confuses them. Expect questions and short conversations about what happened as they learn more.

They are superstitious – they may believe that the person who died can still see or hear them; either closely or from a distance. This can be either comforting or upsetting for them. They may believe they caused the death by something they did or thought (like being angry or naughty). Simple and clear explanations from you can help them understand what happened.

Sudden death frightens them – they feel scared and helpless when they are threatened, and worry more about their safety afterwards. If your child is more easily scared or irritated, this is because their bodies react strongly to feeling unsafe or threatened. They will rely on you to calm them down and take their fears seriously.

They will remember what happened – some memories of what happened (or what they think happened) are hard to forget. You will not always know how much your child thinks about these. Some things that they see, hear, smell, or feel will remind them of what happened. Loud noises or sudden shocks may make them feel unsafe without knowing why. They may think more about what happened at quiet times of the day or night.

They feel stress – stress may affect their friendships, sleeping, concentration, and schoolwork. Some children will be quieter when stressed; others will play up more. Stress and upset in the family will also affect them. The longer they stay



frightened or worried, the more energy they use. Over days and weeks this can drain their body and may leave them open to illness or injury.

Changes in routine distress them – mealtimes, bedtime, chores, play, and school are predictable parts of a child’s day which make them feel secure. A sudden death can disturb these routines. They will feel safest when they are with you or close family members and they know what to expect.

They try to understand other people’s feelings – they are developing the ability to share in the feelings of people they know, but (boys especially) won’t always say how they are feeling. They understand that death brings sadness to people.

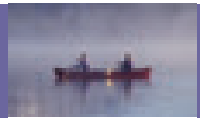
They can become upset about being different – older children in this age-group may feel that what has happened is unfair. They may feel different from others around them – especially if they’ve lost a parent.

What makes things worse?

Witnessing a sudden death – this is very frightening for children who will need explanations and reassurance about what happened. They will remember in detail what they saw, heard, smelled, tasted, or felt at the time. This can make them feel very unsafe and stop them from coming to terms with what happened. It is very important that they understand what they have seen.



Not understanding what has happened – they may think they are responsible in some way for what happened, or that they could have prevented it by doing something differently. They may think the person who died can still see or hear them. They need to be reassured that there is nothing magical about death and that they are not to blame.



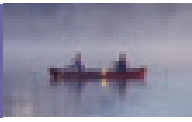
Witnessing uncontrolled emotion – they watch and listen closely to your reactions. If you are upset, they will probably become upset as well. They may be more affected if they sense strong anger, sadness, or worry in you or another family member.

Hiding what they are feeling – they may hide their feelings because they don't want to think about them or they don't want to upset you. They may not feel comfortable talking to friends or teachers about what happened. They need to know they can talk to you about their feelings, even if what they have to say is upsetting.

Feeling unsafe – some children feel very unsafe after a sudden death. Involving them in safety routines (such as locking doors, checking windows, turning on alarms, leaving a light on at night) can help them feel safer. They need to feel safe in school, and on the journey there and back home.

Children with special needs or circumstances

Children with special needs or circumstances will react to sudden death according to their level of understanding. If your child has a learning disability their development may be similar to that of a younger child. They need simple explanations of death and trauma, and encouragement to talk and ask questions. With care and support they will recover.



ADOLESCENCE (10-18 YEARS)

General development

Adolescents have a clearer understanding of death than younger children. They understand the long-term consequences, and think about their own mortality.

They care about what other people think of them, especially their friends. Socialising and being liked by friends outside the family become very important. They change their interests and have different ways of coping – girls are more likely to talk about their emotions and boys are more likely to act them out.

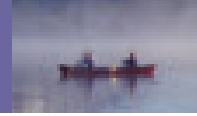
Adolescence is a natural period of change. Physical and psychological changes bring emotions very close to the surface, at a time when adolescents want to become more independent. Misunderstanding and feeling misunderstood are common for both parents and adolescents. Privacy and control can become hot-topics.

They react with their emotions; their responses can appear exaggerated. This is a normal part of growing up. They take more risks (e.g. with drugs, alcohol, sex), and feel more pressure to conform to friends, fashion, or ideals.

If your adolescent has a learning disability their understanding may be similar to that of a younger child. You may find it helpful to read the guidelines for younger children.

Reactions to sudden death

Adolescents understand death – they understand that death is final and happens to everyone. They think about loss, and what this means for the future. However, they have less life experience than adults, so learning to cope will be challenging. They may want to know how the death occurred, and who is to blame.



They are sensitive to emotions – they often hold back feelings they are uncomfortable with. They use friends for emotional support.

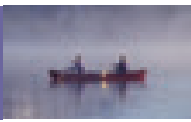
They need to understand what happened – they may feel that what happened was unfair or undeserved; or that there is no justice without someone to blame or punish. Making sense and finding a meaning for what happened can take a long time. Many families must wait for criminal, historical or scientific investigations to discover the truth – for some this will never be known.

Memories and feelings are hard to forget – their memories or fears about what happened can be upsetting, distracting, and hard to control. They remind adolescents of what happened, leaving them feeling nervous and unsafe. Some reminders will trigger these feelings more than others.

Sudden death is frightens them – fear can be difficult to control or forget. They may feel more nervous or unsafe at different times. This is a natural bodily reaction after a strong fright. Dealing with confused feelings and the shock of what happened makes going back to old routines and friendships more difficult. It may also exaggerate difficulties at home, school, and other settings. Anxiety and upset can lead to fatigue and vulnerability to illness.

They experience stress – feeling frightened or unsafe, or thinking a lot about what happened uses up time and energy needed for other things (e.g. growth, education and pastimes). Over days or weeks this drains their body and may leave them open to illness or injury. They may show signs of being irritable, easily startled, or nervous of things that remind them of the trauma. Nightmares, social withdrawal, poor concentration and difficulties in school are common signs of stress in adolescents.





They can be overwhelmed – sudden death is harder to deal with than normal shock or bereavement. Your child may find anger, blame, or guilt difficult to talk about. Media involvement, justice and criminal proceedings can make this process longer and more public.

School sometimes becomes a relief from the unreality of what has happened. Sometimes dramatic changes occur in your child's behaviour as they avoid or confront different feelings (e.g. class-clowning, risk-taking, social withdrawal, or sudden maturity).

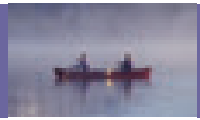
They fear the worst – they may feel guilty or embarrassed about how they acted or wish they had been more patient with the person who died. They realise that what has happened affects their home and social life, and that things can never go back to the way they were. They may feel hopeless or different from other adolescents. They need reassurance that things can get better with time.

What makes things worse?

Witnessing a sudden death – is a frightening experience and your child will need explanations and reassurance about what happened. Some things that they saw, heard, smelled, tasted or felt at the time will be remembered in great detail. This can make coming to terms with what happened more difficult and unsettling.

Having private beliefs and emotions – they may believe that the death could have been avoided somehow. Blame and the need for retribution may be important to them. These feelings are not always shared openly, particularly in the family. They need to be encouraged to open up about their private fears and anger.

Feeling isolated– sudden death can make them feel isolated and family, friends and community are important sources of support. They may need help to go back to clubs, old friendships, etc.



Hiding their feelings – they may hide their feelings because they don't want to make you feel worse. They may not want to talk to friends or teachers, and pretend they are doing better than they are (e.g. playing the clown when they are actually very upset).

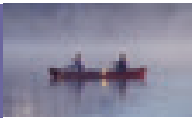
Feeling unsafe– they feel safest when they are with friends or family in a familiar place. Sudden death disrupts these routines, and makes their world less predictable.

The sudden death of someone from school poses particular problems, for example, daily reminders of the person who died and the upset or insensitive actions of other pupils. Because these are experienced at school it is difficult for you to know how the death is affecting your child.

Adolescence is a naturally stressful time – exams, friends, hormones and conflict are big pressures. Sudden death makes these pressures harder to cope with. Adolescents require support and reassurance to deal with their emotions, and understand the world in a more mature way.

Adolescents with special needs or circumstances

Adolescents with special needs or circumstances will react to sudden death according to their level of understanding. If your child has a learning disability their development may be similar to that of a younger child. They need simple explanations of death and trauma, and encouragement to talk and ask questions. With care and support they will recover.



GUIDELINES FOR HELPING CHILDREN OF ALL AGES

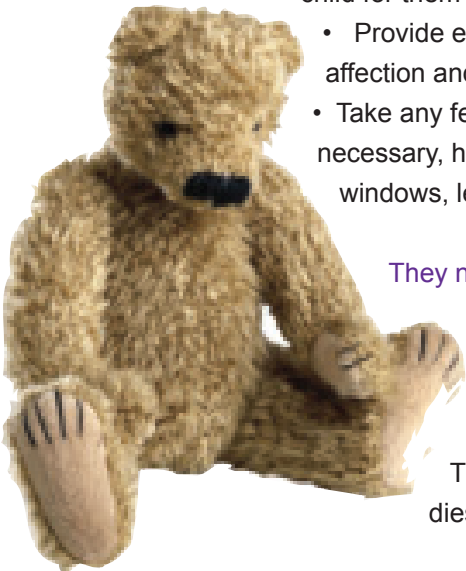
It is important to remember that children are more sensitive to their family's emotions than they seem. They will constantly watch the reactions of those around them and will become upset if adults act in ways they don't understand.

Adolescents use friends as well as family for support following a sudden death. They cope in creative and unusual ways, but may hide how they feel or need help coming to terms with anger, blame, or unfairness.

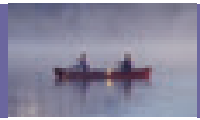
Immediate needs

Children need to feel safe – immediately after the death and in the long term. Avoiding unnecessary separations, having consistent routines, taking your child's concerns seriously and giving them affection can help reassure them that they are safe.

- Return to daily routines quickly (e.g. home, playgroup/school and leisure activities)
- Avoid unnecessary separations and when they are necessary prepare your child for them
 - Provide emotional reassurance by giving your child affection and spending time with them
 - Take any fears about safety seriously and, if necessary, have a safety routine (e.g. check doors and windows, leave lights on at night).



They need clear and honest information – to avoid misunderstandings and fears. Death is best explained to younger children as meaning that a person stops moving and thinking and they don't breathe or feel pain. They also need to know that once a person dies they cannot come back to life.



- Explain the meaning of death as early as possible, and repeat this explanation when your child needs it
- Use your family's belief system to explain death
- Use language and ideas your child will understand – be clear, consistent and not misleading
- Give as much detail as necessary – older children will know when you are holding back.

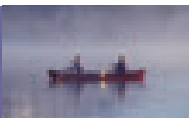
They need help to make the loss real – by being prepared for, and taking part in mourning ceremonies and doing something personal in memory of the person who died. Receiving a keepsake can be very special for them.

- Involve your child in the mourning rituals (e.g. viewing the person, attending their funeral). Prepare them for this by explaining what will happen before they go
- Encourage them to do something for the person who died (e.g. putting a drawing, letter, or present in the coffin)
- Share mementos and photos with your child (they may want to choose their own keepsake)
- Share your own feelings of sadness but be aware that excessive displays of emotion can be overwhelming and frightening.

Long term needs

Children need to understand – it is normal for them to need to talk about the death from time to time as their feelings change. Younger children may only want to ask questions on things they are confused about (such as why people cannot come back to life). They may act out what happened through play. This can be upsetting for parents, but is a sign that they are working through confusing or emotional topics. Adolescents may want to talk about the unfairness of what happened.

- Talk about what happened - short conversations may be most helpful
- Answer their questions simply and truthfully. You may need to do this more



than once as they try to understand

- Check what your child understands by asking them to tell you what they think happened
- Be prepared for a younger child to act out what happened using play
- Allow adolescents time to talk through difficult issues like unfairness, anger or blame
- Visit the grave and other places where they feel close to the person who died
- Look through photo albums together.

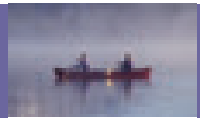
They need help to cope with emotions – children need to talk about their feelings, have their fears taken seriously and be given reassurance and affection.

- Talk to your child about their worries
- If your child has feelings like guilt, anger or blame, reassure them that this is normal and that things can get better with time
- Let them know it is okay to play, have fun and enjoy hobbies
- Take their fears seriously – talk to them and give them support
- Help them find what works best for them, for example, young children will use simple ways of coping such as art, play or stories
- Be aware that adolescents may need to talk to friends as well as family.

They can be supported by adults outside the family – teachers, carers, and other adults in the community can support your child to return to normal life outside the home. They can prepare your child's friends, and answer their questions.

- Talk to your child about the information you need to share with other people
- Contact adults who are important to them and let them know what has happened (e.g. playgroup/school teachers, leaders of community organisations).

They need to get back to routines – as change and lack of routine can cause stress or upset. They feel safest when they know what to do and what to expect.



They like people, places, routines, and activities to be predictable.

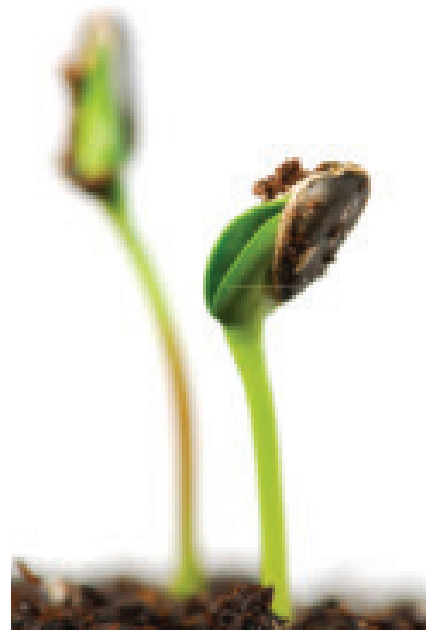
- Re-introduce old routines as soon as possible, or develop new ones if necessary
- Plan regular bed times and routines with familiar activities beforehand
- Keep mealtimes to the same time and place each day
- Support their return to school, work, sports or other activities
- Encourage or organise your child to spend time regularly with friends.

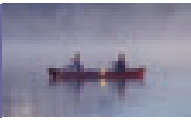
They need help to deal with reminders – some things will remind them of the sudden death or trigger unpleasant feelings and worries. They will need a break from these and a safe place to go to relax and talk.

- Be aware of the things that are likely to remind your child of what happened
- Avoid the ones you can and have a plan to cope with those your child has to come in contact with
- Do something special for anniversaries, birthdays, or other occasions
- Prepare an older child for court cases, coroner's investigations, and public interest by explaining to them what will happen
- Be prepared for media interest in your family, or media coverage of other events that may remind your child of their own experience
- Reassure them that things will get better with time.

The future

Growing up – children understand more about the world as they get older. They may feel differently about what happened as they gain more understanding. Keepsakes and anniversaries will be special to them in the future.





- Expect your child to change how they feel about what happened as they understand more
- Reassure them that these changes are normal
- Expect more complicated questions as they get older
- Involve them in remembering anniversaries, birthdays, and other occasions
- Be optimistic about the future – things can get better.

Each child's grief is different, so it is difficult to say much about the future. Sudden death can be shocking, and change a child's life forever. However, most children will get through this with time, affection, and the support of their family and friends. The most intense grief and upset will usually be experienced within the first two years.

Your child will think about the person who died and what happened many times as they grow older. Talking, remembering, and sharing will help them to understand better what happened.

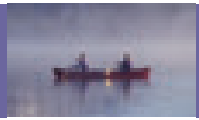
Looking after yourself - remember your health and wellbeing is very important to the wellbeing of your child so look after yourself and accept help from others if you need it.

Availability of booklets

The booklets in this series:

- Dealing with sudden death: helping children and adolescents
- Dealing with sudden death: information for young people
- Dealing with sudden death in adulthood
- Dealing with sudden death: common grief reactions

are available electronically to download from the bereavement page on Belfast Health and Social Care website - www.belfasttrust.hscni.net and Cope with Life website www.copewithlife.org.uk



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Social Care Trust

