

Coronavirus bereavement

Helping a child when someone
they care about has a very
serious Coronavirus illness
or has died



A guide for parents, carers and professionals

About this guide

This guide has been created to help parents and carers support a child after the death of someone special to them. It includes information about bereavement after Coronavirus and how the restrictions in place because of it can affect bereaved children generally.

It can also be used by professionals to help them know how they can support bereaved children and families they come into contact with. Many of the organisations linked here have advice for professionals too.

The death of someone important to us can cause great distress and confusion at any time of our lives. A bereavement during childhood can feel overwhelming for children and young people and difficult to manage, especially if it was a parent or sibling.

Children can, and often do, grieve well even in the most difficult circumstances if they have the support of parents, carers, family members and / or other adults around them. Since early 2020 the new illness called Coronavirus or Covid-19 has created greater difficulties because for some it is a serious illness that caused death and also because it has changed the way that we live life and made it more uncertain.

Bereavement affects everyone in the family, not only children, and you may be struggling with your own grief. There can be lots of reasons for this, including having to deal with lots of practical issues such as making funeral arrangements or sorting out financial arrangements and day to day living arrangements

When someone is very seriously ill and in the early days after a bereavement things can feel overwhelming with little time or energy in the early days to know how best to support your child. This leaflet has been created to help you with some straightforward information and advice about what can help children and young people and give you the confidence to help them work through their grief.



Please note: every effort has been made to make sure that the information is up to date however, because of Coronavirus, some information is being updated and added to regularly. Checking the links to all the organisations listed will give you the most up to date information about the services they offer.

The national organisations that can give you extra help and advice via parent carer helplines are:

[Winston's Wish](https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/>

[Grief Encounter](https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/)

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/>

[Child Bereavement UK](https://www.childbereavementuk.org)

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org>

[Cruse Bereavement Care](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents)

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents>

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When someone is seriously ill because of Coronavirus

You may be reading this because someone in the family or a close friend is very poorly with Coronavirus or Covid-19, and may have been admitted to hospital. This will be a very worrying time for all of you and it is tempting to try to shield children from what is happening or to tell them too much detail that they cannot understand, and is not appropriate for their age. It is important, however, not to shield children from information but to give them as many facts as possible about the situation to avoid further confusion or anxiety.

You may be uncertain about how best to support children when there is a serious illness in the family. Coronavirus is a serious illness, and hopefully, you will have already talked to them about what Coronavirus is but it is important to let them know what is happening to their loved one to prevent them from becoming unnecessarily frightened and anxious.

These are useful resources to help you do this:

[Talking to children about coronavirus](https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/talking-to-your-child-about-coronavirus/)

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/talking-to-your-child-about-coronavirus/>

[Social Story \(explaining Coronavirus to children with additional needs\)](https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf)

<https://carolgraysocialstories.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Pandemics-and-the-Coronavirus.pdf>

Talking to children when someone has life-threatening coronavirus symptoms

Not everyone who becomes seriously ill will die but it is important to think about how you can help children understand what is going on when the symptoms have become serious and prepare them for this.

Be as open and honest as you can about what is happening

- Try not to give long explanations- children cannot absorb lots of information at once. Be patient and try to build their knowledge gradually. Let them know that it is ok to ask questions and be prepared for them to ask the same questions more than once.
- Because coronavirus is a new disease it is causing a lot of fear and anxiety and false information. [Anxiety UK](https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/blog/how-to-talk-to-children-about-covid-19/) and [Young Minds](https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/) parent help provide useful help for you to be able to manage children's anxiety.

<https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/blog/how-to-talk-to-children-about-covid-19/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>

Keep it simple

- Keep explanations simple and stick to the facts that you know- try not to share your worries with them. It is ok to say that you do not know something – and that you will tell them when you have been able to find out.

- Explain to them the factual reasons for why the person is in hospital - how the virus is affecting the person. Drawing simple pictures to show them what is happening to the body can help them understand better and reassure them.
- This leaflet is from America, it may have some useful ideas for us but it is important to remember that their health system is different from ours and so needs to be adapted and not used literally: <https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/downloads-shop/when-someone-dies-from-coronavirus>

Don't make promises that you can't keep- tell them they can't change what's happening

- Try not to give false promises and reassurance ('don't worry, it will be ok') but be realistic, ('we hope that it will be ok and they are getting good help but we do not know yet').
- Help them to understand that they cannot change the situation by behaving in a certain way (If I am good, will granddad get better?). It's important to tell them that there is nothing that they can or should do that will make the person better but that the medical staff are doing their very best to help. However, expression of these thoughts and feelings to others demonstrates care for the person that is unwell and a desire to help and this should be recognised as a good quality.

Sending love and staying in touch

- If you can communicate with the sick person via mobile devices, think about what you want your child to know and see of their care. A video call may cause children more distress if they are unprepared to see what the inside of an intensive care unit looks like. Give children the choice to keep in touch with the person if they want to and encourage them to think of other ways that they can send messages of support and love to the person.

Help them accept their emotions

- Reassure them that it is ok to have worries and mixed up emotions about this and encourage them to express them through drawing, writing or through play.
- Listen to their worries and fears about their health, and of others, and provide reassurance. No matter how illogical they seem to you they are real to them.
- As far as possible keep familiar routines, especially at bedtime and provide hugs and reassurance. Avoid further explanations at bedtime which can cause anxiety. Instead, get them to write their questions or worries down for you to answer during the day.
- Find out more about what you can do to help in this leaflet [After a Frightening Event](#)

https://370ebed6-8a66-420b-a576-c10c79e84fc4.filesusr.com/ugd/06268f_79f6c3072a27458dae2f5d4271b662cf.pdf

Saying goodbye and breaking the news

- If the medical advice is that your loved one will die, take time to think about how you want to tell the children about this. (See advice below too.)
- The circumstances of Coronavirus make saying goodbye to your loved one difficult for all of you but children can be encouraged to write a letter or make drawings to do this. These can be included in the funeral service afterwards and bring children some comfort. This can also be a way for you to do this too.
- Most children have worries about whether it hurts to die and because of the scary news about Coronavirus, this may be causing them distress. This book [Someone Has Died](#) Suddenly can be viewed as a PDF page by page, with useful explanations for you to give them about this, and also the grief process. It can be also ordered online.

<https://www.suddendeath.org/uncategorised/97-order-our-book-for-bereaved-children-someone-has-died-suddenly>

Taking part in the funeral

- Because of the need to prevent the spread of the virus the government has introduced preventative measures that affect how funerals can be conducted. This means that unlike before children may not be able to physically take part. You can find help to know how this will affect you and how to manage this from [Childhood Bereavement Network C-19 help](#) and [NAFD C-19 Funeral advice](#)

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/covid-19.aspx>

<https://nafd.org.uk/funeral-advice/>

Help for teens during a serious family illness

[Hope Support UK](#) is a national charity that offers online support to teens living with a family terminal illness and afterwards, and have adapted their service to offer support because of Coronavirus. Full details of support are on the website but it is still important to consider the guidance above and below if you have teenage children.

How to tell children that someone has died from Coronavirus

For everyone, finding out that someone has died is a very difficult experience. For many families, the death by Coronavirus will be unexpected and sudden even though the person may have been unwell for a while. This means that families and friends will experience greater amounts of shock, numbness and panic and telling the children may be even more difficult.

In addition to the advice above, the tips below are taken from information about how to talk to children about [terminal illness](#) from the Sue Ryder organisation and they are very helpful in this situation. (Please consider in relation to your religious or cultural beliefs):

<https://www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/someone-close-to-me-has-died/advice-and-support/telling-a-child>

- Ask someone else to be there when you tell them to provide extra support.
- Use language they can understand.
- Go at their pace - children have a short concentration span and will not remember large amounts of information.
- Don't worry if you become upset - reassure them that this is understandable.
- Tell them they can't change what's happening - when people die, they cannot come alive again.
- Check what they know and understand and let them know that it is ok to ask more questions later.

- Prepare answers to some practical questions about death – children are very curious about this. Such as: ‘Grandad has died. This means an important part of his body stopped working. Now that he has died he cannot feel, hear or think any more’. When we die we cannot come alive again - for more help view more explanations in [Someone Has Died Suddenly](https://www.suddendeath.org/uncategorised/97-order-our-book-for-bereaved-children-someone-has-died-suddenly)
<https://www.suddendeath.org/uncategorised/97-order-our-book-for-bereaved-children-someone-has-died-suddenly>
- Be prepared to repeat information and explanations for them

Be prepared to offer comfort and physical reassurance afterwards, keep good behavioural boundaries but expect them to have unpredictable behaviours and reactions for a while.

You can find lots more help for this at:

[Childhood Bereavement Network C-19 help](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/covid-19.aspx)

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/covid-19.aspx>

[Cruse Bereavement Care- help for parents](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents)

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents>

[Child Bereavement UK- Coronavirus](https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children)

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children>

[Winston’s Wish- Supporting Children with SEND after bereavement](https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-children-with-send/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-children-with-send/>

[Death after a serious illness](https://www.winstonswish.org/serious-illness/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/serious-illness/>

Telling children with additional needs what has happened

Children with additional needs will need further support and understanding to manage their reactions.

[Autism UK- bereavement](https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx)

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx>

[Winston's wish Podcast](https://www.winstonswish.org/ambitious-autism-podcast-autism-bereavement/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/ambitious-autism-podcast-autism-bereavement/>

[Supporting Children with SEND after bereavement](https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-children-with-send/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-children-with-send/>

[MENCAP Coronavirus \(Covid-19\)](https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/health/coronavirus-covid-19)

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/advice-and-support/health/coronavirus-covid-19>

All have excellent resources.

Think about using successful strategies from their earlier years to help provide reassurance and comfort too.

What is grief?

Grief is a natural and normal response after the death of someone close to us as we try to understand what has happened, manage the changes it causes and try to adjust to living life without them. It involves powerful, and often confusing emotions, thoughts and physical reactions.

Our grief can begin before someone dies when they are very seriously ill and the likelihood is that they will die as we begin to understand this. This can happen to children too.

Our grief is often very intense and hard to manage in the early days after someone dies, then in the months and years afterwards it can become less intense and more manageable as we adjust to life without the deceased.

This does not mean that we no longer care about them but that 'life grows around our grief'. Strong emotions can, and often do come back at unexpected times, especially at anniversaries.

You are also grieving the person who is very ill or has died. If they are your partner or parent, if you have been very involved in their care or the death was very sudden you may have very intense grief reactions yourself.

Although your children are an understandable priority for you it is important to realise that, for you to be able to support them well, you also need help and support from friends and family as you grieve. Why not check out the links to additional family support on page 27?

Find bereavement help for yourself here [a guide for adults](https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/coronavirusbereavement)
www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/coronavirusbereavement

How do children grieve?

In the past, people thought that children were not affected by grief. All children grieve and react to changes in the family around them, even babies, but how they express their grief is different from adults.

Children and young people do not yet have the emotional skills and experience to grieve but need the support of adults around them to do this. When they have this, they can go on to enjoy a full and happy life without lasting negative effects, however, this is not the same as asking them not to care about or forget the person who died.

Children's grief is expressed in many ways but especially in younger children, through their behaviour because they do not have words to express their thoughts and emotions. Even teenagers can struggle to do this without help.

Children's grief does not have a definite timescale, a beginning or end, but they can appear to grieve in 'waves' and need to revisit their grief as they get older and their understanding of the bereavement changes.

Children also have periods when their grief is not active and they can appear to have forgotten about things. This is normal and healthy but can be hard for you to manage the cycles of grief at the same time as managing your own grief.

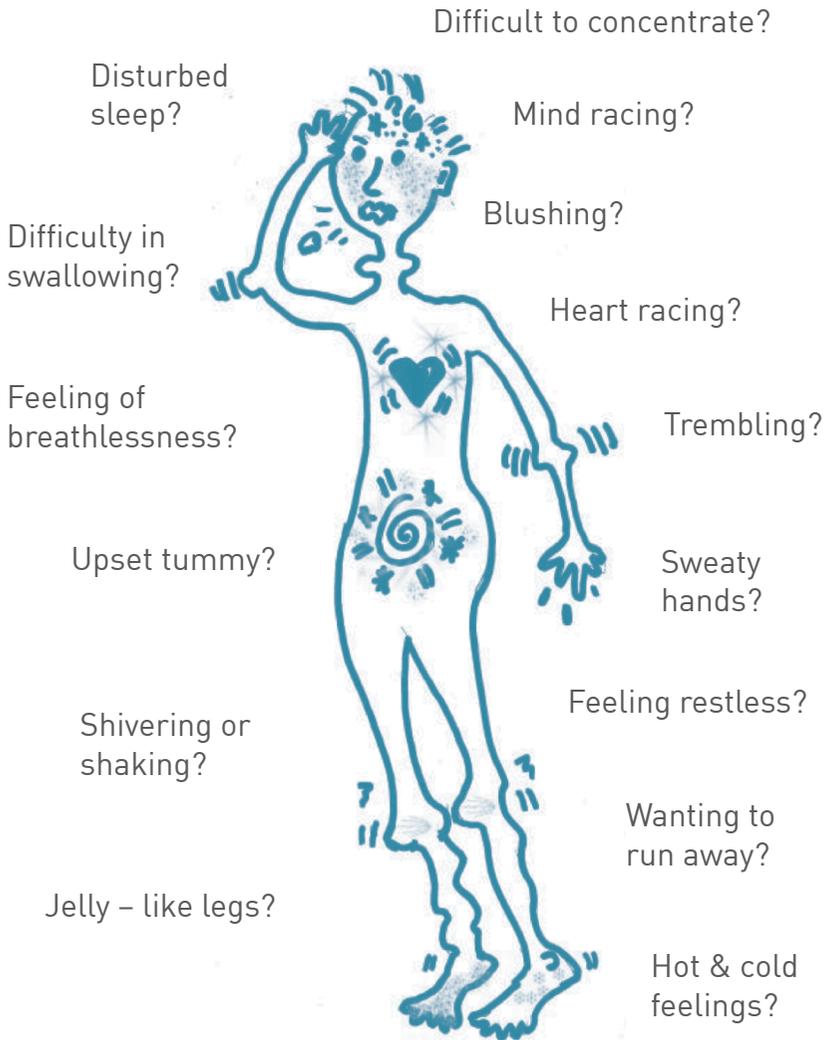
Grief in the early days

The feelings and reactions that we all have when we are first told that someone has died can be very different from what we feel later, especially if we did not expect them to die.

Common reactions that children and young people are likely to have early on are:

- Feelings of shock, panic or disbelief
- Racing heart, feeling faint or breathless
- Feeling numb and emotionless
- Wanting to cry a lot and feeling overwhelmed by their emotions, especially fear, panic and guilt
- Disturbed sleep - not being able to get to sleep
- Finding it hard to return to usual routines or unable to concentrate
- Feeling anxious and fearful, and wanting to stay close to family and home

Is this what shock feels like for you?



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You can use this diagram about shock and anxiety symptoms to help them identify what is happening to them. These reactions can feel very intense and scary but are normal and they will gradually change over the first few days and weeks.

During this time the support from family, friends and school or college is important to help manage these intense reactions.

Small children will need lots of physical reassurance and cuddles.

Keeping familiar routines, as much as possible will help.

Common grief reactions

Although everyone's grief will affect them differently we know that there are reactions that are common to many people. It can be helpful to know these to prevent more fears and uncertainty. Over time, with reassurance and support from parents, carers and teachers at school these should gradually become less.

Common reactions - under 11 years

Young children don't have the words to tell us how they are feeling and show their sadness and distress through their behaviours. They may regress to earlier developmental behaviours such as:

- Being more anxious when away from parents
- Becoming more fearful and needing lots of reassurance
- Nightmares and fear of the dark, not wanting to sleep on their own
- Regressive behaviours such as bedwetting and toileting issues

- Having fears about the future, worries about their health and the safety of others
- Having angry or aggressive behaviour when frustrated or overwhelmed
- Finding it hard to concentrate at school for a while
- Delayed grief - not showing any reactions, appearing numb or unaware

Common reactions - teens

Teenagers can be affected in many of the same ways as younger children but will experience additional reactions. They are also going through huge amounts of changes because of puberty affecting their brains and emotional wellbeing as well as their bodies. Find out more about the [teen brain - advice for parent and carers](#).

<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/Schools-and-education/Childcare-and-advice-for-parents/Parents-and-family-support/My-teens-brain/My-teen-brain.aspx>

Teenagers are more likely to experience:

- Feelings of shame and isolation because of what has happened. (Not knowing how to speak to friends or teachers about this and how to ask for help)
- Intense emotions such as anger, guilt, regret and sadness - with poor coping strategies
- Confusion about their thoughts and fears of what has happened to their loved one after death
- Greater fears about their safety and the safety of others and fears of illness and dying
- Difficulties concentrating at school, panic about meeting deadlines
- Low mood, feeling numb and a sense of hopelessness

Just as when they were younger, all children benefit from calm reassurance, emotional warmth and appropriate boundaries to help them feel safe, especially in the early days.

National organisations below can also give more information about what to expect.

[Winston's Wish](https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/>

[Grief Encounter](https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/)

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/>

[ChildBereavement UK](https://www.childbereavementuk.org)

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org>

[Cruse Bereavement Care](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents)

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents>

How you can help your child grieve?

Children can, and do, manage their grief with the sensitive support of adults around them, especially major caregivers such as parents and immediate family.

They also need to have their grief reactions recognised and to have time to process these in ways that are appropriate to them.

This diagram and the explanations on the following pages can help you to understand what they need to do this and to have ideas about how to help them.



Remember you don't have to do this all on your own – check out the details of extra support available if you need it on page 24.

More about what children and young people need to be able to work through grief

Continued routines and structure

The early days after a death can be a very confusing and painful time. It is normal to want to protect children and try to change things to help with this. The best way that we can help is to keep familiar routines and structure where possible including bedtime routines, having time for fun activities.

Returning to school routine is necessary but can be difficult for some because of temporary separation anxiety. You and your child can talk with the school about a planned return, if necessary, with a part-time timetable but it is important to have a clear timescale for goals for full attendance.

Emotional support from parents and adults around them

Bereaved children need caregivers who can respond to their emotional needs and provide warmth and support when they are upset. This prevents them from feeling overwhelmed or from trying to take care of you.

This can be difficult if you are grieving but there may be a trusted family member who can help you with this until you feel able to take back this role? Why not ask their school if they can provide a trusted member of staff to help too? Your child will feel better knowing who they can approach if they need help in school.



Clear, accurate, age-appropriate information

After a death, children need the reassurance that clear age-appropriate information and explanations about what has happened can give. They also need to know what will happen next for themselves and the family, to help them cope with their fears and worries.

Try to avoid using phrases such as ‘passed away’ to describe what has happened. This can be difficult for a child to understand. Explaining that we die because our body stops working and that different things can cause that will be easier for them to understand and provide reassurance. This is especially important when there has been a sudden death.

[Sudden](#) – an organisation that provides support after a sudden death has a free resource for children, [Someone has died suddenly](#) available on request and further information and advice. The book is useful for all types of bereavement too.

<https://www.suddendeath.org>

<https://www.suddendeath.org/guides-for-suddenly-bereaved-people/help-for-children>



Opportunities to talk about difficult memories

After a frightening event children may have difficulty understanding what has happened and managing the shock and fear involved. They easily jump to wrong conclusions about what has happened causing more fear.

It is helpful to allow children to make sense of this by encouraging them to talk about or draw what they think happened. This gives you a chance to correct any misunderstandings and to provide emotional support and reassurance to help prevent anxiety, nightmares or sleep difficulties developing. The following link has useful resources for parents and carers. [After the Event—resources for supporting children after a frightening event](https://www.aftertheevent.org.uk)

<https://www.aftertheevent.org.uk>



Help to recognise their emotions and express them well

When we are grieving we all experience intense and confusing emotions. Children and young people can have difficulty recognising their emotions, lack the words to describe them and lack the skills to be able to express them appropriately. This can result in further distress, changes in behaviours and increased fears leading to sleep difficulties, emotional outbursts, disruption with friends and family relationships. This is especially the case for children with additional needs. The resources that you already use to manage emotional expression will be helpful.

You can help children by encouraging them to talk about their emotions and ways to manage them. There are many books in libraries and in bookshops that help with this. Check out the book lists at Winston's Wish, Grief Encounter or Child Bereavement UK for suggestions



Help to strengthen memories of their loved one

Grief can temporarily affect the way that we store and recall memories, especially in children. Fears about not being able to remember their loved one are very common. The memories of children and young people need frequent rehearsal, to strengthen them and make recalling them easy. Making a memory jar, box or book, and then talking about what is in there, how they are connected to the deceased etc., can be an important way to strengthen memories and help them still feel connected to the deceased. Photos, special objects, perfumes, music and other mementoes can all be included. For more ideas visit:

[Winston's Wish](https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/>

[Grief Encounter](https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/)

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/>

[Child Bereavement UK](https://www.childbereavementuk.org)

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org>

[Cruse Bereavement Care](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents)

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents>



To be able to understand how this fits in their wider life story

Children and young people need help to have the confidence to know that they can, and will be able to overcome future life challenges and help to learn the skills needed to build emotional resilience. Recognising what is happening to them now is very important for them, but helping them to come to see it as a part of their wider life story can help face the future more confidently.

Encouraging them to think about what they learned from their loved one, what kind of personal qualities they had that they admired and to see this as a legacy can help build resilience and a supportive connection to the deceased throughout their life.



Renewed hope and plans for the future

After a bereavement, it is normal and natural for there to be a period, often of several months when we feel anxious and uncertain about the future. Adults and children alike can become reluctant to plan for the future, especially after a sudden death. Life can feel very unpredictable.

Being able to re-engage with plans for the future or make appropriate new ones is an important part of the adjustment and resilience-building after a bereavement. Having longer-term goals for the future can help children feel more confident, give purpose and meaning for school and friendships.

You can help children and young people to do this by helping them identify what is important to them, what their strengths are, and who or what can support them to achieve their goals.

When you might need extra help

Although grief is a normal and natural process after someone close to us has died this does not mean that sometimes extra help might not be needed or useful.

Many children and parents say that meeting with other bereaved families can help them feel less isolated, exchange advice and make new friendships. Several of the organisations listed in the links below provide opportunities to do this as well as offering advice to parents and individual support for young people during the Coronavirus emergency.

[Winston's Wish](https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/)

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/>

[Grief Encounter](https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/)

<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/child-bereavement-support/>

[Child Bereavement UK](https://www.childbereavementuk.org)

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org>

[Cruse Bereavement Care](https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents)

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-parents>

Other help for families

Bereaved families can experience a lot of additional stress and difficulties after the death of a family member. You can find extra help for you to manage these at:

[Family Lives](https://www.familylives.org.uk/how-we-can-help/confidential-helpline/) free confidential national helpline and information.
<https://www.familylives.org.uk/how-we-can-help/confidential-helpline/>

[Family Support](https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/schools-and-education/childcare-and-advice-for-parents/parents-and-family-support/parents-and-family-support.aspx) in Hertfordshire advice, parenting course and information.

<https://www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/services/schools-and-education/childcare-and-advice-for-parents/parents-and-family-support/parents-and-family-support.aspx>

The Childhood Bereavement Network provides advice about [practical matters](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/practicalities.aspx) after a bereavement such as accessing financial support for parents and guardians, bereavement leave and returning to work or school.

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/help-around-a-death/practicalities.aspx>

If you are worried about your child or young person

Children and young people can be managing grief alongside trying to cope with the major changes it can bring amongst all the other changes that they will experience as part of childhood. This can mean that other things are happening to them that you may also be worried about.

It is important to be clear whether the things that they are having difficulty with are connected to the bereavement or not to get them the right kind of help.

If you can set aside time to talk with your child regularly and listen to their worries you will be able to understand these concerns better. **Talk to your GP or school** about your concerns or contact the following organisations for advice:

[Healthy Young Minds In Herts](https://www.healthyyoungmindsinherts.org.uk/parents-and-carers)

<https://www.healthyyoungmindsinherts.org.uk/parents-and-carers> – online help and advice for parents

Hertfordshire CAMHS' mental health helpline on 0300 777 0707 from 8am-7pm or 01438 843322 from 5pm-8am. Help and advice if you are concerned about your child's mental health.

[Papyrus UK](https://papyrus-uk.org/worried-about-someone/) – I am worried about someone

<https://papyrus-uk.org/worried-about-someone/>



Integrated Health and Care Commissioning Team,
Hertfordshire County Council, hertsjct@nhs.net

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