



Willen Hospice has been providing patient and family support for a number of years offering pre and post bereavement support to both adults and children within the area of Milton Keynes and its surrounding villages.

When you or someone important to you has a terminal diagnosis it can be a shocking and emotional time. Coming to terms with this news can take a while without the added worry of breaking bad news to children at a time when you may be feeling overwhelmed by your own feelings of grief.

As adults we try to protect children by not talking about death and dying, or by not showing any emotions in front of the child; and sometimes pretending that all is normal. Some parents even make sure the child is not around or involved, thinking this will shield children from sadness and pain. Often this behaviour can confuse children and can make them feel excluded from what is happening in the home. Even years after a death, adults can feel angry at the exclusion they experienced as a child.

Timing is of the utmost importance and deciding when death and dying should be discussed is difficult, we all react in our own way and children are unique in the way they grieve too. Children as young as three can pick up when something important is happening by the behaviour and body language of others, they may not understand what illness and death is but they will be aware of the emotions of those around them, in fact children can feel left out or hurt especially if they have not been told directly or have not been included in something that is obviously important.

We cannot always prevent children from feeling sad or hurt but by talking to them and including them in what is happening we can demonstrate our support and understanding as well as being available to answer any questions they may wish to ask.

Breaking bad news is incredibly hard for a parent to do, but you do not need to be alone; friends, family or professionals can support you with this task and of course help you to support the children too.

It is okay to cry in front of children, this gives the child or young person permission to cry too.

Find a quiet place where you will be undisturbed and comfortable, sit yourself and the child down before speaking, be honest and as open as possible, try not to use euphemisms – gone to sleep, passed away or lost as these might confuse a child. Children need to be given clear concise information in a language suitable for their age. It is best to tell siblings together rather than individually as this prevents them from feeling left out or last to know. Talking about death and dying can be difficult for us all but children are far more comfortable with these words than we may realize and by using the correct words stops their imagination running away with them, being dead is very different from being asleep.

Many explanations may make sense to an adult but not always to children. Here are a few examples:



Children's understanding and reactions are likely to vary.

The way they react will be influenced by:

- How close they were to the person who died,
- What has actually happened
- The child's stage of development and understanding
- Their emotional maturity
- Their experiences in life so far
- Your family's cultural and spiritual beliefs

It can be helpful to find out what your child understands and what they think is happening, as this allows you to correct any misunderstandings from the beginning. Be honest and tell them what is happened and what is likely to happen next, let them know this illness is not their fault and they can't catch it. Children can only take in as much as they can manage in one session, you can always say more at another time.

Be consistent, keep to the same rules and ways of doing things at home as far as possible. Children need to know what they can rely on which leads to feelings of safety, it is very tempting to allow them to stay up late and ease up on your usual boundaries but this can confuse and worry children.



It's okay for children to visit hospitals and attend funerals

Just like adults, children may show shock and disbelief, they may cry or be full of despair. Some may be quiet or stunned. Other may show inappropriate reactions, and may say "Can I play out now please?" or "What's for tea?" All of these reactions are normal; they can always come back to you and ask more questions should they need to at a later date.

Younger children may even revert back to an earlier age and have toileting issues or feeding problems, whereas teenagers may feel they need to step up and take the role of an adult but of course this is not necessary. Children and young people need space and time to themselves; they need to be asked if they would like to be involved in visiting the patient or afterward in funeral preparations and the service. By explaining what is taking place will help children decide if they want to attend or not which of course is their decision. Visits and funerals give children the opportunity to say goodbye and witness the different ways family and friends grieve.

Going to work, school or playgroup can be one of the few places where things feel normal and can be a relief from the emotions of home. Some teenagers may be hesitant about informing other people they know due to the information may change the relationship. It may help if the schools have been informed of the situation and are aware of the changes that will be taking place in the home. Many schools can support your child should they become overwhelmed during the school day but this will need to be agreed with your teenager.

It is common for children to worry about what will happen to them, they may be concerned about future care and who will look after them should anything happen to their existing parent, by having these conversations it will help them feel safe. Children also need to know this is nobody's fault that someone is ill or has died and just because one person has died it doesn't mean that others around them are going to die too.

Children can often feel their behaviour has caused someone to die and this can leave them with feelings of guilt, children need to be reassured that nothing they said, did or thought has caused this to happen. Let them know that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone will adjust eventually and in time some of the sad feeling will go away but you are always there to share their sadness, memories and questions.

We have many books we can recommend which may help you to explain the situation to young children.

How to get in touch

If you would like further support or advice regarding children, those caring for a friend or relative known to the Hospice, or after the loss of a loved one. Please telephone Willen Hospice on **01908 663636** for the:

Young People's Support Service

Offers support to children and young adults under the age of 18 regarding pre and post bereavement.

Email: youngpeople@willen-hospice.org.uk

Patient & Carer Support Service

Offers support to adults known to a patient under Willen Hospice's care through one to one support, telephone support, Carers Drop-in here at the Hospice, or One to One support is also offered.

Email: patient@carers@willen-hospice.org.uk

Bereavement Support Service

Offers support to those who are now bereaved. This can be through one to one support, group support, telephone support - each Thursday evening 6pm - 8pm.

Email: bereavement@willen-hospice.org.uk



Children under 5 may have heard about dying but do not really understand what it means, they may imagine that a dead person will come back because they are living elsewhere. This age often require reminding that the person who has died will not be coming back again but they can still talk about and remember the things they did together. Children who cannot remember the person who has died can often quote family stories and memories of that person as if they were their own.

Primary age children 6 – 12 are starting to understand that death is permanent and final, and they may have a morbid fascination regarding the whole process and the rituals involved. They may even feel that death is something you can catch and therefore worry about being caught or the possibility that someone else they know may catch it too. Death may be pain and frightening to them. These are the years when children may demand reassurance and become insecure when adults leave them and can often become aggressive or withdrawn.

Teenagers find life difficult just because they are teenagers, let alone needing the maturity to cope with what is happening or has happened. Teenagers can find it harder to cope than younger children mainly because they know this will mean a major change and loss in their life. Teenagers struggle to ask for help, they try to show how independent they are by challenging the beliefs and explanations of others and prefer to rely on the opinions of their peer group.



This is the age when they may take up risky behaviours for example; smoking, drinking or driving too fast as a test of their own mortality. They may get angry with you and then feel guilty about how they have acted, or feel bad about spending time with their friends. Often adults are very sympathetic when a young person loses a parent and will often excuse bad behaviour or let them off pressures such as homework, going to school or helping around the house. This can however, exacerbate young people's feelings of aloneness whereas structure helps them preserve some order in their lives.

Memories are important to children and young people

When someone is dying or has died who has played a large part in the child's life it will leave countless moments when the person is missed, some children are happy to talk about the missing person others not. Anniversaries, Christmas and other festivals are a good time to plan something special. Maybe having a special day out or looking at photos and talking about the person who has died will give the opportunity to discuss how everyone is feeling. It's also good to remind children to have fun even though they may feel sad.

Creating a memory box can be a sad thing to do, but it can also be satisfying to do something that will help your child to hold on to the memories of times shared and treasured moments. You may even find it will make you laugh as well as cry. Children often like to help in decorating the outside of their chosen box (shoeboxes are ideal) and choosing items they would like to keep. Photos, letters, cards and trinkets which remind the child of a memory or family story are perfect to keep. Small items of clothing, for example gloves or scarves, help the child maintain a link to the person that has died. Perfumes and aftershave and favourite family recipes again evoke such special memories. Some children like to add to their boxes over many years for example father's day cards etc.



As children grow and develop they may need help in understanding what has happened, requiring more details of the event which will help them to make sense of it all. Revisiting their grief in this way is something children do naturally and is not an indication of the way they were supported earlier in their grief; they need to go over it again to fit into their new view of the world.

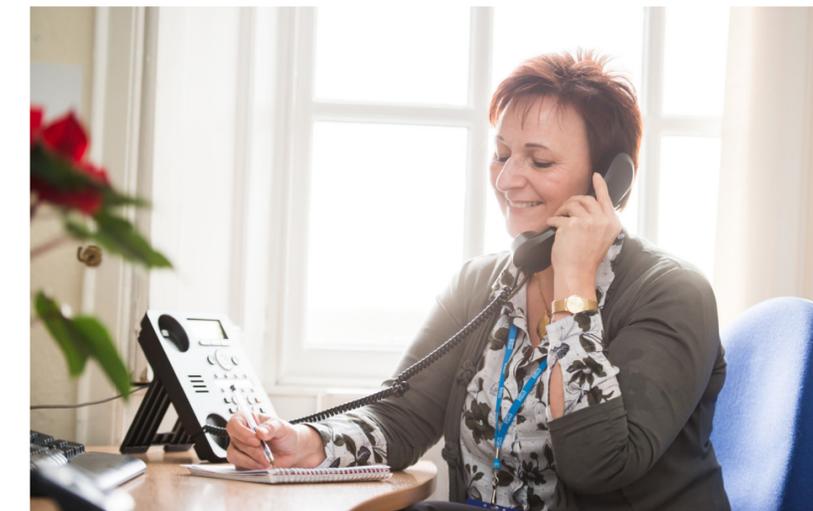
Adults too will be trying to cope with their own grief, as well as the practical issues that arise in these circumstances. Remember your own wellbeing; if possible try to build a network of helpful and supportive people in your life to help you and your child.



How can the Young People's Support Service help?

We can offer one to one support to children. Encouraging them to talk about their concerns, with the aid of books and play activities, by creating a memory box, scrap book, photo album, salt jar and many, many more.

We have a large number of books which can be lent to parents to aid open discussions.



Useful Websites and Telephone Numbers:

Macmillan Cancer Support Tel: 0808 808 0000 www.macmillan.org.uk

Childhood Bereavement Tel: 0115 911 8070 Email: cpb@ncb.org.uk

Winston's Wish Family Line Tel: 0845 203045 Email: info@winstonwish.org.uk

Cruse Bereavement Care Helpline: 0844 4779400 Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Helpline: 0800 0288840* Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm Email: support@childbereavementuk.org

Childline www.childline.org.uk

Charlie Waller Memorial Trust www.cwmt.org.uk

Youth Bereavement Line Tel: 0808 808 1677

Other useful websites:

www.achance2talk.com (run by NSPCC and Childline)

www.rd4u.org.uk (run by Cruse Bereavement Care)

www.riprap.org.uk - support especially for those affected by the loss of someone close through cancer.

Contacts for young carers (children as the main carer):

Supporting Young Carers Tel: 020 7254 6251 www.family-action.org.uk

Carers Milton Keynes Tel: 01908 231703 www.carersmiltonkeynes.org



We are your Young People's Support Service

A guide to supporting young people during bereavement

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