

GUIDANCE FOR NOTIFYING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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This document is intended to provide guidance for notifying children and young people. Depending on the nature of your role, you may be required to deliver a death notification directly to a child or young person, at the request of their parent/caregiver, or as a result of the circumstances of the loss.

However, this document also contains information which can be passed to parents/caregivers and other family members to support them to notify a child or young person.

Guidance for notifying children and young people

- i. Sit down with your child at eye level and say that you have something sad to tell them.
- ii. Use language that the child can understand, and be honest, without giving unnecessary details.
- iii. It is important to use language such as 'died' and 'dead' rather than 'gone away', 'passed away' or 'gone to a better place'. You may need to repeat the information several times to check that they have understood. Sometimes it is difficult for younger children to grasp the finality of death and so they may need to have it explained to them in the following terms: "When someone dies, their body stops working. Their heart stops beating and breathing stops. Their brain doesn't send or receive messages. They can no longer see, hear, talk, touch, taste, smell, eat, play, think or feel and they cannot move".
- iv. You should not assume that the child fully understands what they have been told (you may need to repeat the information several times or ask them questions to check that they have understood, particularly if they do not exhibit any emotions such as sadness or distress). Reassure the parent/caregiver that death notification for children is a process that takes place over a much longer period of time than for adults.
- v. Try to answer all questions honestly and remember that it is okay to say if you don't know the answer.
- vi. It is important to provide reassurance that they are safe.
- vii. Children will express their feelings through play, therefore providing them with familiar toys to express their feelings is helpful.

Additional guidance for parents/caregivers

- Encourage parents/caregivers to access additional support from the wider family (or their social support network) to ensure that the child is surrounded by familiar adults, who they know and trust.
- It is possible that children will not want to talk to their parent about their feelings for fear of upsetting them and so it is important to ensure that they have access to other familiar adults so that they can ask questions and seek reassurance.
- For many children, this may be their first experience with a death. It is nearly impossible to predict how a child will respond to the news that a family member has died.
- Although children have similar feelings to adults, they may react quite differently.
- It is not uncommon for children to express anger, fear and guilt. Other common reactions include children acting younger than their age, to react as though nothing has happened, to become quiet and withdrawn, or fearful and anxious.

Responding to identity and context

Children may also respond differently depending on their age and developmental level.



Responding to identity and context

Notifying children of different ages

AGES 2 AND YOUNGER

Children under the age of 2 will not have an understanding of the concept of death, however, they understand 'here' and 'not here'.

Children at this age are very aware of the emotions of the parent/caregiver and will likely react to the level of distress of the NOK.

They may experience anxiety if separated from their parent/caregiver but will not require a verbal explanation of the death as such.

It is important to try and maintain a normal routine and to ensure familiarity (both with adults and the physical environment)

Responding to identity and context

Notifying children of different ages

AGES 2 – 6 YEARS

Children within this age range tend to think in concrete or literal terms. As such, they need to be told that the death is permanent and given facts about the death.

It may help to use the explanation above and to ensure that ambiguous terms such as 'passed away' or 'sleeping' are avoided to prevent confusion in the longer term.

Responding to identity and context

Notifying children of different ages

AGES 7 - 11 YEARS

Children within this age range have a better understanding of the permanence of death and will likely have questions about the death as well as being more likely to express emotion.

It is important to tell the child the honest facts about who died, where, how and when and should encourage the child to discuss their feelings.

Responding to identity and context

Notifying children of different ages

AGES 11 YEARS ONWARDS

You should explain the death as you would with an adult. Adolescents are more likely to ask questions which the parent/caregiver may not have the answers to and should be reassured that it is okay if they do not know the answer or have an explanation.

Accounting for the needs of children and young people

It is important to reassure parents/caregivers that there is no right or wrong way for children to grieve. However, some of the early warning signs which may indicate that a child is struggling with the loss and may need professional input, include the following:

- Frequent bed wetting.
- Physical complaints such as nausea or headaches.
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares.
- Changes to eating habits.
- Spending more time on their own.
- Separation anxiety (e.g. refusing to go to school or leave their parent).
- Exaggerated feelings of blame or guilt.
- Thoughts of hurting themselves.
- Acts of self-harm.



Accounting for the needs of children and young people: support

Encourage parents/caregiver to access support from their family doctor, Health Visitor (or other health or social care professional) or the child's school.

Winston's Wish is a national bereavement charity which specialises in working with children and young people and is experienced with supporting families after a sudden and traumatic death. They operate a helpline which is for children, families and professionals and this is an excellent resource if further guidance is needed at this stage.

You may contact the helpline directly and seek guidance or you can encourage the parent/caregiver to contact them for support (or a mixture of the two). They will be able to provide specific advice in relation to the language and approach to be taken to notifying a child and are in a position to offer emotional support and reassurance to parents/caregivers.

www.winstonswish.org

Help and Support line: 08088 020 021

For those outside of the UK, the helpline email can be used: ask@winstonswish.org

