

Building resilience in bereaved children

'The strongest oak of the forest is not the one that is protected from the storm and hidden from the sun. It's the one that stands in the open where it is compelled to struggle for its existence against the winds and rains and the scorching sun'. Napoleon Hill (1883-1970)

We often talk about children being resilient and somehow believe they bounce back more readily than adults just because they are children. But a child's resilience has a lot to do with their self esteem – how they feel about themselves, what they know they have and can rely on, and what they can do well.

Building resilience is especially important for bereaved children. Nothing can take away the sadness when someone important to them dies. However we can support children to feel good about themselves and help them to find ways to manage the worries and uncertainties that come with this huge change in their life.

Ways to help build resilience

Reassure children

- Tell them that they are loveable, and are loved.
- Reassure them that they are not to blame for the person dying.
- Explain about the people who will care for them, and the people they can rely on.
- Tell them why they are special to you.

Give children clear, consistent and honest messages

- Explain who is there for them when they want to talk, ask questions or have a hug.
- Answer their questions honestly, with appropriate language for their age.

Keep to routines if possible

- Familiar routines increase a child's feelings of security and keeps a sense of continuity.
- When you need to go out, let them know when you will be back.

Encourage thoughts and feelings

- Help them to know that whatever they feel is OK.
- Help them to express any anger in a way that does not hurt them or others.
- Find ways to help them make and maintain memories of the person who has died.
- Acknowledge difficult feelings or worries and find ways together to help manage these.
- Adolescents may talk more to their friends than to their family, and this is an important source of support, alongside a trusted adult who is there for them.

Involve children and encourage their input

- Ask them what they think and listen to their point of view about things that affect them.
- Involve them appropriately in decision-making, which can help them feel more in control.
- Encourage them to enjoy helping other people, without expecting them to take on adult responsibilities.

Involve other people who support your child

- Tell their school (or encourage older young people to talk to their tutors) about any additional support they may need. If possible, involve your child in plans for supporting them.
- In a similar way, involve any leaders of clubs or community groups that your child goes to.

Praise and encourage children

- Show that you believe in them and give praise for things they do and what they manage.
- Acknowledge when they have managed things that are difficult for them.
- Encourage independence that is appropriate for their age, whilst still being there for them.

Support for you

You are a role model for the children in your care. You can show them that you value yourself by making time for you and not having too high expectations of yourself. It can be immensely difficult to try to meet all your children's needs when you are also grieving. Be kind to yourself and don't try to be a 'super parent'.

Understand that bereavement affects what children can cope with

- Bereaved children (and adults) may struggle with things that they would usually take in their stride, such as falling out with a friend. Any change is likely to be more of a challenge for a bereaved child who is facing lots of change in their life.
- Keep normal, clear boundaries around their behaviour, as this helps children to feel secure.
- Recognize that it is OK for them still to be children, to laugh, play and have fun, as well as to have time to be sad and to grieve.

Encourage hopes for the future

- Help children to see that changes are part of life and it is how we manage change that makes a difference.
- Encourage their interests and discussions about goals and what they want to do in life.

Resources and further reading

Other Child Bereavement UK information sheets you may find helpful are listed below. These Information sheets and our short guidance films are on our website www.childbereavementuk.org

- *When someone may have died by suicide*
- *Explaining funerals, burial and cremation to children*
- *Viewing a body with a child*
- *What helps grieving children and young people*

The following are available from bookshops or online booksellers, unless otherwise stated.

For children

Cottonwood Colin

Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross

Picture book for young children about little mouse Colin whose mother wraps him in cotton wool, but who learns to feel much bigger without his cotton wool.

For young people

Everything's changing: the young person's guide to grief and loss

Ann Atkin

Workbook for young people that encourages self-awareness and ways to manage change. Available from: www.everythingschangingbook.com

The huge bag of worries

Virginia Ironside

Jenny's worries grow into a huge bag that follows her everywhere. Who can help? For primary ages.

For professionals

Helping children to build self-esteem: A photocopiable activities book

Deborah M Plummer

What to do when you worry too much

Dawn Huebner

Guides children and parents through the cognitive-behavioural techniques most often used in the treatment of anxiety. Explains approaches for children aged 6 – 12 years.

Further resources and/or references are available from Child Bereavement UK, upon request