



We would really like to hear
your comments on this guide
and the accompanying book
for children and their carers.

Please email
brakecare@brake.org.uk
with any comments or
questions for us.

Someone has died in a road crash

A guide for professionals caring for bereaved children and their families



This guide should be read by professionals who are responsible for handing this book out to bereaved families >



Produced by

Brake
the road safety charity
www.brake.org.uk

Supported by



Helpline **01484 421 611**

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Introduction

This guide is for professionals caring for children and families bereaved by a road crash. If you are a social worker, teacher, foster parent, counsellor, GP, police Family Liaison Officer, religious or spiritual leader or voluntary support worker, this guide is for you.

This guide has been written to accompany a children's book called *Someone has been killed in a road crash*. You should ensure you have a copy of this book at hand before you read this guide. The children's book is being distributed for free to families bereaved by a road crash by police officers across the UK. Please ensure that any bereaved families you are working with also have the book. If they don't, please call the BrakeCare helpline immediately (see below) and we will get one to them.



This guide takes you through the content of the children's book *Someone has been killed in a road crash*, and the academic thinking behind it. By doing so, it helps inform you, the professional carer, about the needs of bereaved families, in particular bereaved children.

Page 11 of this guide gives information for professionals on how else to help bereaved families.

Guidance specifically for teachers is on page 13.

Both this guide and the children's book have been written by Brake, the national road safety charity. Brake provides support services for families bereaved by road death, including a helpline. This helpline is available to professionals as well as affected families. If you have any queries about how to best support a bereaved family, or want help accessing local support services, please call our helpline on

01484 421 611.

The reality of road deaths

Every day in the UK, ten people die in road crashes, devastating families. Many of the bereaved relatives are children. These children often experience one of the worst bereavements of all – often the death of a parent or guardian, or both parents or guardians, or a sibling or siblings, when it was least expected, usually in the prime of life, and in very violent circumstances. The reality is that road crash victims are frequently crushed to death or bleed to death at the scene of the crash, or die later in hospital with horrendous internal injuries.

Sometimes, a surviving child was in the crash and witnessed family members dying, either at the scene or in hospital. A child who was in the crash may themselves have serious injuries that will last a lifetime, such as brain injury or spinal injury, or have a surviving parent or sibling who has serious injuries.

Sometimes, a child's entire family is wiped out and they are the sole survivor, meaning they are grieving and also facing the very difficult challenge of adjusting to a new life in a new home with new adult carers.

Always, a child bereaved by road death needs love and support and care to enable them to grieve and have the best chance of a full and happy life. **You can help.**

The purpose of this guide

This guide accompanies a children's book called *Someone has been killed in a road crash*. The children's book is for bereaved children and their adult carers to read together, to help children through their grief.

The purpose of this guide is to help you to understand the contents of the children's book a little better and enable you, or a bereaved family you are working with, to use it more effectively.

Someone has been killed in a road crash was developed in consultation with experts in child bereavement and bereaved parents and children, and piloted with families who have experienced the death of a loved one on the roads, to ensure it offers the best possible support.

In addition to reading this short guide, there are guidance notes for adult carers at the front of *Someone has been killed in a road crash*. There are also lists of support agencies at the back of that book.

How do children grieve?

Children are often described as 'the forgotten mourners' because they are frequently excluded from having a full and active role in the grieving process. This exclusion is usually, and misguidedly, in the belief that the less a child knows, and the more they are diverted from the topic of the death or deaths, the less it will hurt them.

In reality, children have a right to know what has happened, and a right to grieve, just like everyone else. Hiding a child from the truth is only storing up trouble and potential resentment for later. There is a wealth of academic research to show that it is much better to tell children things than to keep them in the dark. Children have active imaginations and if you don't tell them things, their imaginations will fill in the gaps with something that may be even more horrendous than the truth.¹

Children grieve in different ways at different times. At different times they may cry, get angry, be quiet, be noisy, talk about the person who died, not talk about them, and play or behave as though nothing had happened.

All these reactions and many more are natural. Your job is to help families or carers support them through their grief, answer their questions honestly, and help them feel safe and loved.



Advising parents and carers

It may be your job to give the book *Someone has been killed in a road crash* to an adult carer or parent and to encourage them to read it with their children.

This guide can help you explain the value of the children's book to this carer or parent and the importance of them reading it with their children. You should encourage the carer or parent to read the children's book thoroughly themselves before reading it with their children, particularly the Listen Up, Grown Up section at the very front of the book.

As parents or carers are also likely to be grieving, it's important that they remember to think about their own well being too. BrakeCare produces support literature for adults who have been bereaved. This is available by calling the BrakeCare helpline on 01484 421 611.

The children's book is for all children, whatever their age.

The children's book can be read to siblings from the same family at the same time.

Brake developed *Someone has been killed in a road crash* to work on different levels for different aged children – older children can read the text and younger children can look at the colourful images and listen to the descriptions read by the parent or carer.

It is very important that the book appeals to children of different ages. This is because there is often more than one bereaved child in a family unit. It is very appropriate to read the book aloud to a group of siblings.

Grieving children should not be talked down to, or kept in the dark.

They should be given the opportunity to ask questions and share their feelings.

The children's book encourages discussion and honesty between children and adult carers, using simple language and an open tone. The book includes:

- Opportunities for adult carers to share information about the crash and the death(s)
- Questions for the children, to encourage them to share their feelings and thoughts
- Opportunities for children to write down memories and carry out activities
- A promise for carers and children to read and sign, to enable them to support each other through their grief

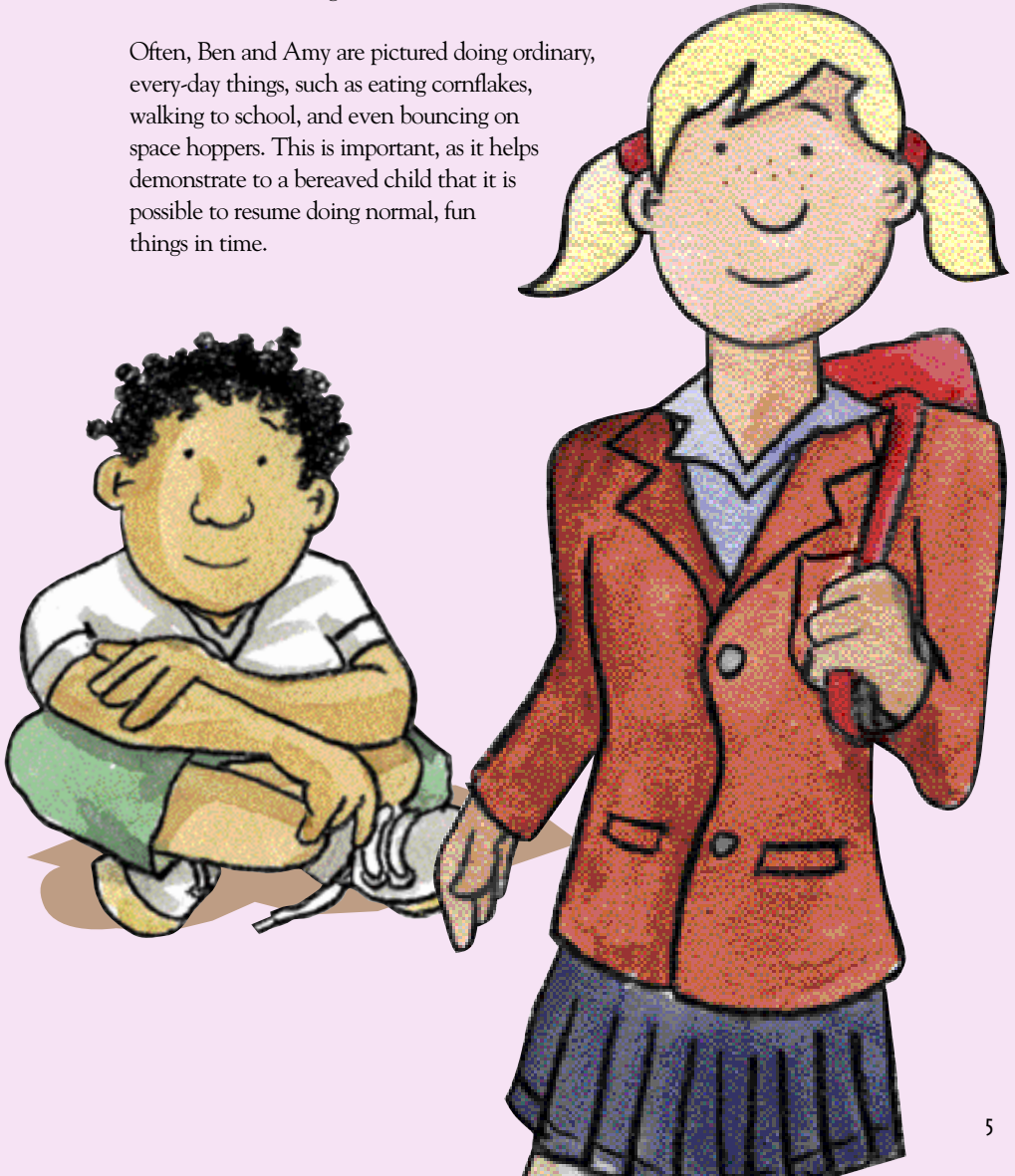
These are simple ways for families in distress to share emotions and support each other.



It helps to know you are not alone

The book is narrated by two children – Ben and Amy – who have both been bereaved on the road and are recovering from their grief. Many children do not know anyone else who has been bereaved, and this can make them feel isolated. The characters Ben and Amy can help them feel they are not alone. Through simple actions Ben and Amy illustrate and describe a range of emotions from anger and sadness, to feeling better.

Often, Ben and Amy are pictured doing ordinary, every-day things, such as eating cornflakes, walking to school, and even bouncing on space hoppers. This is important, as it helps demonstrate to a bereaved child that it is possible to resume doing normal, fun things in time.



A step by step guide to the contents of the children's book and the academic thinking behind it

The book starts with an introduction to death, shock and sadness. It then gives opportunities for frank discussion about what happened in the crash, what it feels like to die and what happens to the body. This is followed by different emotions that bereaved children often feel and how to cope. The book ends with a section on how to remember the person who has died, including space to write down memories in the book itself.



It is difficult for children to comprehend the enormity of death, and to understand why it has happened. **Why did they die?** (page 3) covers the kind of questions children may ask right away. Younger children may not grasp the finality of death and think, unless told, that the dead person will wake up.²

I don't believe it has happened! (page 4) Children, like adults, find it hard to understand that something terrible has changed their lives forever, and will often be in complete denial about what has happened. The initial shock of the death is often replayed in the child's mind, for example on waking up each morning.³

Children may feel unwell, or be visibly very upset. Some children, particularly younger children, may not appear to react to the death at all, or may say things that seem insensitive, such as asking to go out to play straight after being told. **All about shock** (page 5) explains the emotional and physical reactions to shock and looks at comforts such as food, warmth and love. These things can help children feel better.⁴

Like adults, children dip in and out of grief, but feelings of sadness can seem overwhelming and never-ending. **Feeling sad** (page 6) shows children that their unhappiness is a normal part of the grieving process. It also reassures them that they won't feel sad forever, and that good things will happen again.⁵

Road crashes are often called 'accidents' but there is always a reason behind a crash, and it can be helpful for children to understand why it happened. After all, 'Why?' is the most common question asked by a child. **Why do road crashes happen?** (page 7) explains some of the actions that cause crashes, such as speeding and drink-driving.



What happened in the crash? (page 8) allows children to ask questions about the crash. It is better for children to know the facts than to be kept in the dark, however horrific the circumstances, because they may imagine something even worse.⁶

It can be reassuring for children to know that everything possible was done to save the life of their special person. **All about the emergency services** and **All about the police** (pages 9 and 10) describes the kind of care and treatment that is given to road crash victims by paramedics, police, firefighters and doctors. Many emergency workers are happy to talk to bereaved families.⁷ You may feel it is appropriate to suggest to an adult carer or parent that they find out if an emergency service is able to talk to the family about what happened.

Children, particularly boys, are often fascinated by the details of a death, and may want to know exactly what happened, even if this seems gory to adults. Boys are more likely to ask about the details – girls usually want to know too, but may be more reluctant to ask. **Why do road crashes kill people?** (pages 11 and 12) explains how a crash can affect parts of the body and why this can cause a person to die.

Very young children may not have been taught about death, and may be very interested in what death feels like, and whether the dead person felt any pain. **What does it feel like to die in a road crash?** (page 13) deals with children's natural curiosity about the death and re-enforces the message that dead people don't have any feelings.⁸

The role of A&E and Intensive Care Units are discussed in **Dying in a hospital** (page 14), to help children understand how hospitals try to save lives and why this often doesn't work when someone is hurt badly in a road crash. Families often spend tortuous days, weeks or even months waiting in a hospital while doctors try to save a road crash victim's life and then ultimately fail. Being caught between hope and the likelihood of death during this time is an additional, extreme stress for families who are then ultimately bereaved.

Giving parts of a dead body to someone who is alive to help them get better (pages 15 and 16) raises the issue of transplants and how organs or tissue from a dead person can sometimes be used to help other people. For some families, it is a source of comfort to know that a dead person's body has been used to help other people live, although donation is not possible in all cases.



A step by step guide to the contents of the children's book and the academic thinking behind it (Continued)

Children, like adults, are often encouraged not to view a body and to remember the dead person as they were. However research suggests that it is better to give children a choice, based on clear communication of what a body will look like (some bodies are very badly damaged and do not look like the person at all).

Can I see their body? and **Seeing a body** (pages 17 and 18) helps the adult carer or parent to explain what a body looks like and then gives them a chance to offer the child a choice to see or not to see a body. Viewing a dead body can help children to understand the finality of death and to say goodbye to their loved one.⁹

After a road crash, there will usually be an autopsy to determine the cause of death.

What happens to my special person's body now? (page 19) discusses the role of an autopsy in finding out how the crash caused the person to die.

Children want to know what happens to the body, and may ask questions about burning bodies, or bodies decaying underground. **What happens to the body then?** (page 20) looks at the differences between burial and cremation and what each process involves.¹⁰

We are having a funeral (page 21) helps children to prepare for what to expect at the funeral and to open a discussion about attending. Many adults think that the formal setting of a funeral is inappropriate for a child, but children may benefit from taking part if they know what to expect.¹¹

A death on the road often results in criminal proceedings against a driver thought to be at fault. Children can be prepared for this process. This is particularly important for older children who may read about it in the paper, or hear other children talking about it at school. Children also need to be prepared for the fact that sometimes no one is punished. **Punishing dangerous drivers** (pages 22 and 23) tackles who is to blame for the crash, and what can happen to drivers who are at fault.

Common feeling 1: I want to cry (page 25) shows crying as a normal part of the grieving process. Children should be encouraged to express their emotions, instead of copying the behaviour of a parent or carer, who is 'putting on a brave front'.¹²

Common feeling 2: I'm really angry (page 26) gives examples of safe ways to express anger, such as hitting a cushion. Children should be encouraged to channel their anger into behaviour that does not harm themselves or other people.¹³



Common feeling 3: It was my fault (page 27) tackles common feelings of guilt children experience after a death on the road. It is vitally important to tell children they are not to blame for a death. Many children believe their thoughts or behaviour are to blame for a death, or that the crash is their fault because they were not there to prevent it.¹⁴

Common feeling 4: I feel alone (page 28) deals with the isolation that children often feel following a bereavement. Children can be excluded or even teased by other children because someone has died. They can also feel lonely if they do not know any other children who have lost a loved one.¹⁵

Common feeling 5: Things other people say (page 29) highlights some of the insensitive sayings children hear from well-meaning friends or adults, such as 'you're the man of the house now' or 'you're young, you'll get over it'. Children may act like 'little adults' following a death, but they should not be encouraged to take on the responsibilities of the dead person.¹⁶

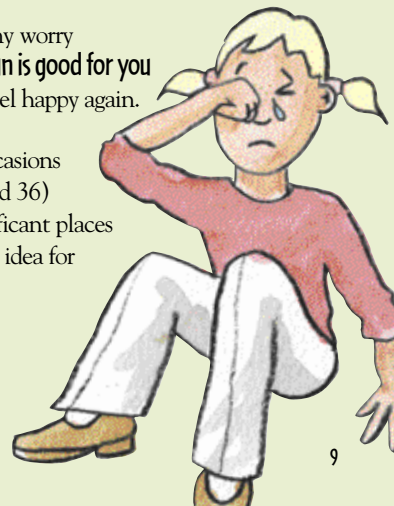
Common feeling 6: I just don't want to do anything any more (page 30) deals with feelings of despondency and lack of motivation.¹⁷ Encouraging children to take up a new activity or hobby can help them to feel normal again.

Common feeling 7: I can't get the crash out of my head (page 31) explores the difficult memories and thoughts children experience about the crash, whether or not they witnessed the event. Encouraging children to write down or draw their experiences can help them to make sense of their feelings.

Common feeling 8: Are other people I know going to die in a road crash? (page 32) explores the common fears that children experience following the death of someone close. Children may be excessively worried about the health of surviving relatives and friends, and will need reassurance, particularly about the dangers of roads.

It can be difficult for children to think about the future, and many worry that they will always feel sad. **When will I feel better?** and **Having fun is good for you** (pages 33 and 34) reassure children that they will have fun and feel happy again.

It's important to encourage children to commemorate special occasions such as birthdays or anniversaries. **How to remember** (pages 35 and 36) deals with ways of keeping memories alive by remembering significant places or events, or creating a memory box for special mementos.¹⁸ The idea for a memory box is inspired by the children's bereavement charity Winston's Wish.¹⁹



A step by step guide to the contents of the children's book and the academic thinking behind it (Continued)

All about them (page 37) encourages children to write down the important things they remember about their special person.²⁰ This can help them remember why the dead person was special to them.

Expressing grief creatively through drawing or writing can really benefit children.

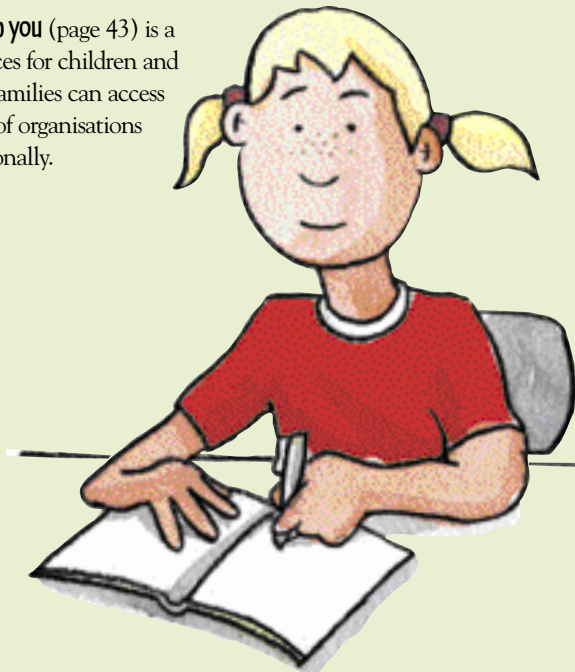
My poem (page 38) uses a simple formula to enable children to create their own poem about the person who died.

There are lots of things we can do to be as safe as possible on the roads (pages 39 and 40) asks children and their parents or carers to sign up to Brake's Stay Safe Family Promise. By agreeing to cross the roads safely, take extra care in the car and wear seat belts, parents and children are making a commitment to keeping as safe as possible on the roads.

Children often find it hard to express their emotions, so it can be helpful to set out 'rules' allowing them to express themselves, and saying how they'd like to be treated.

Our promise (page 41) is based on postcards developed by the Childhood Bereavement Network that allow children to choose how their parents or carers interact with them.²¹

Organisations that can help you (page 43) is a list of bereavement services for children and their families. Bereaved families can access support through a range of organisations working locally and nationally.



What else you, as a professional, can do to help

As well as helping bereaved families to read the book *Someone has been killed in a road crash* there are other things you can do to help.

General support and signposting:

- Provide general practical and emotional support, after studying this guide and the accompanying children's book carefully to ensure your support is empathetic and appropriate. Practical support could include informing a child's nursery or school about the bereavement, and the need for the child to be given support in the nursery or school environment.
- Signpost bereaved families to local bereavement counselling services. If you do not have local contacts, you can call our helpline on 01484 421 611 and we will research local agencies for you. Bereaved families do not want to spend time wading through the phone book.
- Signpost parents to the national bereavement services listed at the back of the children's book, including the BrakeCare helpline, websites for bereaved children and bereavement workbooks for children.

Child protection:

Notice warning signs of bereaved parents who are struggling to cope and inform social services if you are concerned for a child's safety. Due to alcohol or drug abuse, or mental illness, some vulnerable bereaved families may be, at least temporarily, unable to care for children without support from social services, other family members, or good health care. With this support, it can be possible to prevent a complete breakdown of a family.

The difference between shock and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

In the first days and weeks after a sudden death it is normal for bereaved people to suffer extreme shock and emotions. However, over time this shock should subside, and although grief and sadness remain, the bereaved person is able to begin to recover.

However, it is not uncommon for a sudden and violent bereavement to trigger Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can be diagnosed after



What else you, as a professional, can do to help (Continued)

about three months or at any time after this. Symptoms include physical illness, stuttering, jumping at loud noises, extreme emotions, and inability to get on with normal life. It is common to be scared of the outdoors, be unable to work or hold down relationships, or eat properly.

If you know someone who is displaying these symptoms it is possible for them to have an assessment for PTSD. If diagnosed, the condition can be treated through cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – a form of talk-based counselling provided by therapists who are experienced in working with families who have suffered something terrible such as a sudden death. To find out more about the signs of PTSD and for help accessing an assessment for PTSD call the BrakeCare helpline on 01484 421 611.



Specific advice for teachers

Telling other pupils

Talk to the child and their carer about what they want. Some children find it helpful for a teacher to tell their class about the bereavement, but other children may choose to tell only a select group of friends themselves.

Allow time out

Let bereaved children take short breaks from class or assembly when they are upset. Give them somewhere safe and quiet they can go where there is caring adult supervision, no questions asked – such as a staff room or a medical room. Ensure all teachers understand the child can always go to this room without having to explain why.

Look for changes in performance and behaviour

Bereaved children may lose interest in their work, or become disruptive or withdrawn at any time. This could happen months or even years after a bereavement, but still be connected to the bereavement. If their performance or behaviour is out of character, consider that it may be due to the bereavement. Grief takes a long time and it is your job to be supportive, not demanding.

Talk regularly to the child's parent or carer – some children act OK at school but are very upset or disruptive at home, or vice-versa.

Inform the child's carer or parent if you notice any change in a bereaved child, so the carer or parent has an opportunity to talk to the child and to help them progress through their grief with continued love and support. It may be that the child has questions that have not been answered, or has particular concerns. Through conversation, you or their adult carer or parent may be able to resolve an issue for the child and enable that child to move forward more positively.

Case study:

Daniel knew his dad had been killed in a collision between his car and a tanker. He suddenly got very upset a year later. Through conversation, it emerged that it had struck Daniel that the tanker must have been very big, and that his dad must have been very slowly crushed to death when the tanker fell on top of his car, and his dad must have been very frightened before he died. In truth, his dad had died quickly on impact, and the tanker hadn't toppled slowly on top of the car. Daniel had never been told this. Once he knew this, he felt a bit better.



Specific advice for teachers (Continued)

Children under attack

Watch out for bullying – children can be cruel and may even tease a child who has been bereaved, particularly if the bereaved child doesn't want to take part in games or conversation because they are too upset. Sometimes, bullying can occur simply because they are seen as different now they are bereaved.

Sensitive subjects

Be aware of any activities that may spark an upsetting memory. For example, a lesson on road safety, or a lesson where children make a 'Mother's Day' or 'Father's Day' card. However, don't automatically exclude a bereaved child from such lessons. The best thing to do is to talk to the child and their carer to help them choose what they would like to do.

Case study:

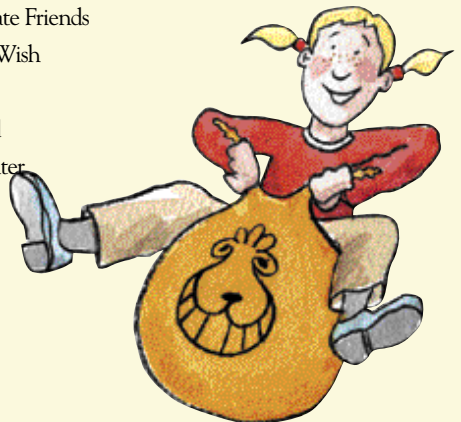
Emma's class was going to make Mother's Day cards, but her mum had been killed in a road crash two years ago. Emma's teacher talked to Emma and her dad in private. Emma decided she wanted to take part in the lesson because making cards was fun, and she remembered her mum really well and wanted to carry on remembering her. Emma decided to make a card to put on her mother's grave. She decorated it with tissue paper daffodils because she remembered that these were her mum's favourite flowers.

Don't presume that you know what a bereaved child would like to do, and enable them to do what they want to do in a caring, supportive environment.



Further reading

- A Child's Grief**, Winston's Wish
- Children and Bereavement**, 2nd edition, Wendy Duffy
- Getting Over an Accident**, Child Accident Prevention Trust
- Good Grief, Under Elevens**, Barbara Ward and Associates
- Grief Encounter**, Shelley Gilbert
- Helping Children Cope with Death**, The Dougy Center
- Helping Children Cope with Grief – Facing a death in the family**, Rosemary Wells
- Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss**, Claudia Jewett, Sudden Death Association
- I Can, You Can Postcards**, Childhood Bereavement Network
- Interventions with Bereaved Children**, Susan C Smith and Sister Margaret Pennells
- Life & Loss, a Guide to Help Grieving Children**, Linda Goldman
- Loss, Change and Grief**, Erica Brown
- Mental Health and Growing Up**, 2nd edition, **Death in the family – helping children to cope**,
The Royal College of Psychiatrists
- My Father Died**, Cruse Bereavement Care
- My Mother Died**, Cruse Bereavement Care
- Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine**, Diana Crossley, Winston's Wish
- Ordinary Days, Shattered Lives**, Child Bereavement Trust
- Our Surviving Children**, The Compassionate Friends
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**, David Kinchin
- Sudden Death, a Research Base for Practice**, Bob Wright (People look different after die)
- Talking about Death**, Earl A Grollman
- Talking with Children and Young People about Death and Dying**, Mary Turner
- The Forgotten Mourners: Guidelines for Working with Bereaved Children**, 2nd edition, Susan C Smith
- The Sudden Death of Our Child**, The Compassionate Friends
- Then, Now and Always**, Julie A Stokes, Winston's Wish
- Waving Goodbye**, The Dougy Center
- When Someone Very Special Dies**, Marge Heegaard
- 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child**, The Dougy Center



Footnotes

- 1 Sudden death, A research base for practice, Bob Wright p.63-68
- 2 Life & Loss, a guide to helping grieving children, Linda Goldman p.75
- 3 Helping children cope with grief, Rosemary Wells, p.28
- 4 Helping Children Cope with Death, The Dougy Center, p.8
- 5 Helping children cope with grief, Facing a death in the family, Rosemary Wells and Talking with children and Young People about Dying, Mary Turner, p.95
- 6 Life & Loss, a guide to helping grieving children, Linda Goldman, p.77, 35 Ways to help a grieving child, The Dougy Center, p.5
- 7 Life & Loss, a guide to helping grieving children, Linda Goldman, p.76
- 8 Life & Loss, a guide to helping grieving children, Linda Goldman, p.75
- 9 Helping Children Cope with Death, Dougy Centre, p.45
- 10 Talking about Death, Earl A Grollman p.60-61
- 11 Life & Loss, a guide to helping grieving children, Linda Goldman, 35 Ways to help a grieving child, The Dougy Center, p.5
- 12 Helping children cope with grief, Facing a death in the family, Rosemary Wells and Talking with children and Young People about Dying, Mary Turner, p.95
- 13 Life & Loss, a guide to help grieving children, Linda Goldman p.28 & 56 and Helping Children Cope with Death, Dougy Centre, p.15 & 26
- 14 Children and Bereavement, Wendy Duffy, p.13, Helping Children Cope with Death, Dougy Centre, p.19 & 25, Life & Loss, a guide to help grieving children, Linda Goldman p.58 and Talking with children and Young People about Dying, Mary Turner, p.105
- 15 Talking with children and Young People about Dying, Mary Turner, p.95, Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine, Diana Crossley, Winston's Wish, p.21, and 35 ways to help a grieving child, Dougy Center, p.34
- 16 Life & Loss, a guide to help grieving children, Linda Goldman p.28 & 56 and Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine, Diana Crossley, Winston's Wish, p.29
- 17 Coping with Grief when someone you love is killed on the road, Brake.
- 18 Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine by Diana Crossley, Winston's Wish, p.14 & 29 and Then, Now and Always, Julie Stokes, Winston's Wish, p.69
- 19 Then, Now and Always, Julie Stokes, Winston's Wish, p.80
- 20 Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine, Diana Crossley, Winston's Wish, p.10 & 11
- 21 Childhood Bereavement Network, I can, You can

