



Experts in Children & Young People's
Emotional Well-being

Supporting young people after a sudden and distressing loss



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Guidance for parents



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Supporting Your Child After a Sudden and Distressing Loss

A sudden and distressing loss within the school community can deeply affect young people, even if they did not know the person personally. Grief and shock can be confusing emotions, and your child may need extra support and reassurance as they try to understand what has happened. As a parent or caregiver, your response plays a vital role in helping them feel safe, heard, and supported.

This guide provides practical advice on how to approach conversations about loss, respond to your child's emotions, and offer ongoing support at home.

Looking After Yourself First

Before supporting a young person through a sudden and distressing loss, take a moment to check in with yourself. Grief and shock can affect everyone differently, and if you are struggling with your own emotions, it is important to seek support for yourself first. Providing reassurance to a young person requires emotional strength, and it is okay to acknowledge when you need help. Whether it is speaking with a trusted friend, a colleague, a counsellor, or accessing professional support, taking care of your own wellbeing ensures that you can offer the best possible support to those who need it.

Creating a Safe Space for Conversations

Your child may have many thoughts and emotions about the loss, or they may struggle to express how they feel. Creating a safe space for discussion can help them process their feelings at their own pace.

How to Approach the Topic:

- Find the right moment – Choose a quiet time when your child feels comfortable and is not distracted. Car journeys, mealtimes, or bedtime can often be good moments for open conversations.
- Use simple, clear language – Avoid complicated explanations. Be honest but sensitive in how you talk about what has happened.
- Follow your child's lead – Let them guide the conversation. If they ask questions, answer them calmly and truthfully at an age-appropriate level.
- What You Could Say:
 - "I know you've heard about what happened at school. I just want you to know I'm here if you want to talk about it."
 - "It's okay to feel sad, confused, or even unsure of what you're feeling. Grief is different for everyone."
 - "You don't have to talk right now, but whenever you feel like it, I'll always be here to listen."

Responding to Your Child's Emotions

Grief affects young people in different ways. Some may show their emotions openly, while others may keep their feelings inside. Some may act as if nothing has happened, while others may have changes in behaviour.

Common Reactions and How to Respond:

Reaction	How You Can Support Your Child
Sadness or crying	Comfort them, reassure them that it's okay to cry, and offer a hug or quiet presence if they need it.
Anxiety or fear	Let them know they are safe and remind them of the support available at home and school.
Anger or frustration	Acknowledge their feelings without judgement, and encourage them to express their emotions in healthy ways (e.g., talking, drawing, writing).
Withdrawal or silence	Give them space but remind them you are there for them whenever they are ready to talk.
Acting as if nothing happened	Recognise that they may not be ready to process their emotions yet. Keep communication open and offer support without pressure.

Providing Reassurance and Stability

A sudden loss can make young people feel uncertain or unsafe. Providing a sense of security can help them regain emotional balance.

- Stick to routines – Keeping daily life as normal as possible can be comforting for your child. Regular mealtimes, school attendance, and bedtime routines help provide stability.
- Encourage social connection – Spending time with family and friends can help your child feel supported. Encourage gentle activities that bring comfort.
- Limit exposure to distressing details – If the loss has been widely discussed in the community or online, be mindful of how much information your child is exposed to. Avoid unnecessary speculation or frightening details.
- What You Could Say to Reassure Them:
 - “You are safe, and we will get through this together.”
 - “At school, your teachers and friends are there to support you, just like I am here for you at home.”
 - “It’s okay if you don’t know how to feel. Your emotions might change from day to day, and that’s normal.”

Supporting Your Child Over Time

Grief does not follow a fixed timeline. Some young people may seem fine at first but feel the impact later. Keep communication open and continue offering support as time goes on.

Ways to Offer Ongoing Support:

- Check in regularly – Even if your child isn't talking much, gently ask how they are feeling from time to time.
- Encourage creative expression – Some young people find it easier to express emotions through writing, drawing, or music rather than talking.
- Watch for changes in behaviour – If your child becomes withdrawn, struggles with schoolwork, has trouble sleeping, or shows signs of prolonged distress, consider seeking additional support.

When to Seek Extra Help:

If your child is struggling to cope over an extended period, it may be helpful to seek support from a school counsellor, GP, or mental health professional. Signs that your child may need extra help include:

- Persistent sadness or mood changes that last for weeks.
- Extreme anxiety, fear, or panic attacks.
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares that do not improve.
- Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy.
- Withdrawing completely from family and friends.
- Seeking professional support is not a sign of weakness—it is a way to ensure your child gets the help they need to process their emotions in a healthy way.

Final Thoughts: You Are Not Alone

Helping a child through grief can be challenging, but you don't have to do it alone. Your support and presence are the most important things your child needs right now. Be patient with them, offer reassurance, and remind them that they are surrounded by people who care.

If you need guidance, don't hesitate to reach out to your child's school, a trusted professional, or support organisations that specialise in grief and loss.