

Factsheet: Going back to school



The Irish Childhood
Bereavement Network

Going back to school & managing change

Returning to school after a death in the family can be hard for children in some ways and in other ways they look forward to doing 'normal' things and seeing their friends. It is generally best for children to return to school quite soon after the funeral is over. There are some things you can do which may make it easier for children to go back to school:

- Tell the school in advance about the bereavement if they do not already know. It may help to let your child's teacher or year head know what the child has been told about the death, how he or she has reacted and if there is anything in particular they should look out for.
- Some children like the death to be acknowledged, they like the teacher to mention it to the class and perhaps have a minute's silence or say a prayer for the person. Other children may not want any attention on them or the changes in their family so may not want anything to be said. Ask the child what they would like.
- It can help to talk to the child a day or two before they return to school and to ask them what they would like the teacher/s to do to help them when they are back at school.
- Listen to their concerns, they may worry about how their friends will treat them.
- Children often see school as a place where they can take a break from grief and sadness to just do normal things. They often need to carry on as normal.
- Teachers can be an important part of the caring circle for grieving children and they may notice changes in how the child is managing at school. Communicating and checking in with them regularly may be a help to you.
- Bereaved children often find it hard to concentrate in school, and as grief can be an ongoing process for children, it can be helpful to remember that changes may not show up initially but may surface later on.
- It is helpful to let the teacher know when the anniversary will be so they can be sensitive to the needs of the child.
- Any day can be difficult for a grieving child but some days are harder than others. Days such as Mother's or Father's Day can be difficult if the class is engaged in making cards for parents: a bereaved child needs choice as to what they would like to do. Many make cards to remember their deceased parent and use them in different ways.

Managing change

A death in the family will bring lots of changes for everyone, including children.

Although many changes cannot be avoided it is best to keep changes to a minimum.

Consider what changes your child is going through that you may not have noticed.

Children feel most secure when life seems to go on as before and seems predictable. To help children with this it can be important to;

- Keep the same routine for bedtime, mealtimes, activities and TV etc.
- Be consistent with discipline, firm but fair. It is easy for this to become relaxed as we may feel we are being kind to children but they feel safe if the same rules apply in the family after the death

- Getting back into the school / crèche routine can assist in settling children after a time of change and upheaval.
- Carers, babysitters or child-minders should be kept the same if possible. In the weeks or months after the death of a close family member it is not an ideal time to make big changes to a child's care.
- Prepare children in advance for changes if they need to happen, give as much time as you can for them to adjust. Involve children in changes that affect the family.
- Limiting visitors to the home after the death may be very difficult but it may be necessary in order for things to settle down for young children.

For further information see: www.childhoodbereavement.ie

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