Love and light create grief and shadow…

Walking in their Shadow
Supporting children and young people through bereavement
Contents

Introduction ..............................................................................................................................................7

Section 1: Help!
It may seem obvious, but… ................................................................................................................12
The top ten dos and don’ts ..............................................................................................................17
‘What do I do?’ flow chart ..............................................................................................................19
Helping hands ..................................................................................................................................20

Section 2: The worst week
Session guides: what, why, how? .....................................................................................................24
Session 1: Palm Sunday ..................................................................................................................25
Session 2: Maundy Thursday ........................................................................................................34
Session 3: Good Friday ..................................................................................................................42
Session 4: Holy Saturday ...............................................................................................................52
Session 5: Easter Day ......................................................................................................................62

Section 3: Some things to do
Why these activities? ......................................................................................................................74
Calendars ..........................................................................................................................................75
Bottles ..............................................................................................................................................76
Memory boxes ...............................................................................................................................77
Balloons ...........................................................................................................................................78
‘I need to tell you’ cards ..................................................................................................................79
Activity sheets ................................................................................................................................83
Introduction

What is Walking in their Shadow?

This resource is a practical guide for children's workers, youth workers and others working in a church or chaplaincy context to use with children and young people who have been bereaved. It is written in three sections. The first section, ‘Help!’ is made up of basic and very practical advice. It includes the top ten dos and don’ts as well as lists of useful websites, agencies and books. The second section, ‘The worst week’, comprises five session guides that can be used either with groups or on a one-to-one basis. These five sessions move chronologically through Holy Week and are titled accordingly; the reason for pinning the sessions to Holy Week is explained in the introduction to the section. The final section, ‘Some things to do’, includes information and ideas for activities that can be really helpful to use with bereaved children and young people. There are also activity sheets compiled at the back of the book. These three sections of the book will work together to provide you with a practical and relevant guide to supporting children and young people through their grief and bereavement.

The book is called Walking in their Shadow because this is how I think children’s and youth workers should approach their work with a bereaved child or young person. Look at it like this: when someone has been bereaved, they are almost shrouded in a dark shadow of grief. The presence of this dark shadow doesn’t mean that they can never and will never be happy again; quite the opposite. It is because there was and still is happiness and light in the world that the shadows exist. If we didn’t love people, then we wouldn’t grieve them when they’re gone. Love and light create grief and shadow.

It is our role, then, as people working with these children and teenagers, to come alongside them and walk with them in the shadows, supporting and encouraging them, but, more often than not, just being there. For as long as they need you or as
long as you can be there, simply walk with them on what will probably prove to be one of the hardest journeys of their lives.

Working with and supporting a grieving child or young person is not for the faint-hearted. It’s hard, it can be messy and it is definitely not quick, but what this resource aims to do is to provide you with some pointers on how to walk with them through their shadows.

Why has it been written?

Walking in their Shadow is inspired and motivated by my own personal experience, but I don’t want to stand in the conceited position of thinking that, as a youth worker who was once a bereaved young person, I am some sort of expert. I honestly don’t believe that you can be an expert in something as vast and unfathomable as grief.

As I spoke with children’s and youth workers about their feelings towards working with bereaved children and young people, it became clear that, alongside their feelings of sympathy and desire to help, many also felt unprepared, out of their depth and even scared. There is a fear of not knowing what to do, summed up by a youth worker with 20 years’ experience in the words, ‘You don’t want to make things worse.’ Comments from other youth workers included: ‘It’s hard to know what to do or say’ and ‘You don’t want to step on the family’s grieving process.’ This resource aims to give confidence to people involved with bereaved children and young people, to reassure them that their role is not to try to make things better, but rather to walk alongside the bereaved. In this, their pre-existing relationship with the child is both a huge asset and a fantastic starting point.

I want to use both my positive and my negative experiences as foundations for building this resource—a resource that will, God willing, help children’s and youth workers and others in a church or chaplaincy context come alongside bereaved children and young people, making their journey through the shadows just that little bit more bearable and supported.

I’m not trying to provide a cure-all magic fix, because there isn’t one and never will be. I don’t want to present this resource as a manual. It is not a ‘how to’ guide that has all the information. It is simply an honest, frank and practical resource to dip in and out of and to use in conjunction with other resources.

Death is something that all too often leaves us with some huge question marks. Why did they die? What happens now? How will I cope? This resource isn’t trying to give an answer to these questions—because when it comes to grief there are
questions that are unanswerable. What I hope it will do is help children and young people to accept and make their peace with the fact that the question marks exist, allowing them to start a new chapter.

I know that there is a very real need for this resource, and I hope that it will become a vital part of any children’s or youth worker’s tool kit—not a book that is in constant use, but a well-thumbed fixture on the bookshelf, ready to be used in times of need.
Section 1

Help!
It may seem obvious, but...

When someone dies, it is a massive thing to take, not just for the family members involved but also for those known to the family and working with them. If a child or young person in your youth club or church has just been bereaved, the chances are that you, as a professional, knew the deceased—possibly very well. Add into the equation the fact that the death may have been sudden or traumatic, and the result is that you in turn could be affected by the death. As humans we are programmed to care when someone dies; if we, because of the roles we have, involve ourselves further in that death by supporting a grieving child or young person, it’s in our biological make-up to care even more.

Because of this, it’s often easy to forget best practice, so we make mistakes, becoming overly involved or saying things we later regret. It’s not because we are unprofessional but because grief, thankfully, isn’t something that we have to cope with professionally every day, and as humans we are prone to mess up. This resource won’t prevent you from making mistakes ever again, but, by summarising some aspects that may seem obvious but are easy to trip up on, it will aid you in walking with children and young people in their shadows.

Try not to panic

When it comes to difficult situations in children’s and youth work, often the best piece of advice is not to panic. Whether you are working with a safeguarding issue, someone who has had an accident while in your care, or a bereaved child or young person, the same principle applies: they’re allowed to panic, but you are not.

This child or young person’s family, home life and whole world will probably
have been turned upside down; panic and stress are among the multitude of
econcerts they will be feeling at this time. It could feel as if they are drowning; the
more stressed they become, the deeper they sink. How much more will they feel as
if they can’t keep their head above the surface if the water is choppy and threatening
to overcome them? It is our job in this situation to be their sea of calm, allowing
them to realise that they don’t need to worry as much as they perhaps first thought.

Of course, you may well be panicking on the inside, especially if it’s the first time
you have worked with a bereaved child or young person or if you’ve never had an
experience of grief yourself. You may feel completely out of your depth, terrified
that you will let them down, but you can’t let fear dictate the way you support
them. Find a person to talk to—for example, a mentor or pastoral supervisor—so
that when you are in contact with the child or young person, you can take the strain
of their worry and hurt without exacerbating the situation.

Bereaved children and young people aren’t aliens

The child or young person with whom you are working will be experiencing a
massive change in many of their relationships. Family life may have become com-
pletely unrecognisable to them and, in fact, something that no longer feels safe.
Their friends may be at a loss to know how to behave around them now. They may
feel isolated from everyone because people seem to be suddenly treating them like a
grief bomb that could go off at any moment.

When a child or young person has experienced a bereavement, the automatic
reaction is to want to prevent them being hurt any further; we want to wrap them up
in cotton wool and tell everyone else not to bother them. While this reaction stems
from a caring instinct, it could be harmful to the child or young person. In trying
to protect them, you may well alienate them and make them feel that, because they
have suffered a bereavement, they can no longer be treated like other young people.

For this very reason, then, maintaining the same kind of relationship with them,
maintaining your level of interaction with them and maintaining boundaries
with them could be among the most caring things you could do while they are
experiencing their grief. In a world where suddenly everything feels different, you
could be the one person who remains consistent and keeps your relationship with
them the same. Their situation may have changed dramatically but they themselves
are still very much the same person; show them that you appreciate and understand
this fact.
Nothing is normal or expected

‘That’s OK, it’s normal to feel like that’ is something that could well be on the tip of your tongue when trying to soothe a grieving child or young person who is worried that what they’re feeling is wrong. But, while the sentiments are in the right place, the truth is that nothing about their current situation is normal or expected. Although death is the only certain thing in life, people often don’t expect it to happen at the time and in the way that it does, and those who are left behind rarely expect to feel the way they do. ‘Normal’ is a word that will probably stop being part of their vocabulary for quite a while.

Telling a child or young person that what they are feeling is normal and to be expected—that it’s what every grieving child or young person feels—instantly devalues their emotions. If they hear that their experience of grief isn’t unique, they will probably feel less inclined to share that experience with the person who has told them that their feelings are not special.

However, telling them that anything they are feeling is allowed or completely natural is a good thing. Their experience is not normal, but certain reactions to grief are natural. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified five recognisable reactions that a bereaved person may experience, usually described as the ‘five stages of grief’: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These are common and completely natural. Other reactions may include being unable to concentrate, sudden changes in sleep patterns, appetite or character, or retreating into a fantasy world in which their special person hasn’t actually died. It is important, if you are supporting a bereaved person, to make sure they understand that they are not going mad, and that the behaviour or emotions they are experiencing are the body’s natural response to the death of a loved one (something thought to be as physically and emotionally painful as coming off heroin).

There can sometimes, however, be a perception that grief will run a predictable course or that children don’t grieve as intensely as adults. The ‘five stages of grief’ model can be interpreted in too linear and prescriptive a way, with the bereaved person feeling that they’re grieving ‘wrongly’ if they do not feel a particular emotion at a particular time or if they don’t ‘move on’ at the point indicated. It is important to understand and acknowledge the unending and cyclical nature of grief: it is a serious lifelong condition and we need to learn to live with it. Grief is the same as love, except that the loved person is no longer with us.
Don’t tell them to stop doing something

A child or young person might be a talker or a crier; he or she might be a writer or an artist, or even the strong, silent type. When expressing the emotions associated with grief, children and young people will naturally do the thing that feels best for them. The way they choose to express themselves may be the polar opposite of the way that you would cope, but that doesn’t matter; you may even learn something from watching a child or young person expressing themselves in a different way.

You can suggest additional ideas to help them express themselves, but you cannot tell them to stop doing what they’re doing. It may feel like the hundredth time that you’ve heard them tell you a particular story, but don’t tell them to stop talking to you. You may feel as if all you’re doing is looking at drawings that they have done, but you’re going to have to keep looking at them. Telling a child to stop coping in a way that feels natural to them will make them feel as if you’re trying to take away one of their arms. It is their expression of their grief. You are an important part of that expression, but the decisions on the best ways to express themselves lie with them alone.

Have faith in your own ability to walk with the child or young person as they communicate their grief to you. Often, in cases of childhood or adolescent bereavement, young people are referred to professional helpers too quickly, disregarding the huge amount of support a young person can gain from an already established relationship with someone like a youth worker or teacher.

A professional counsellor may be needed, however, if a child appears to be coping with their bereavement in negative, unhealthy or dangerous ways. While you, as a source of support and comfort to the bereaved, will provide more than enough in the majority of cases, there may be occasions when a young person does need extra care from a medical professional or counsellor. These cases could include bereavements where the death was particularly traumatic—for example, a suicide or an accident that the young person witnessed or was involved in—or where the young person was the primary/sole carer for the person who died. Reactions to bereavement that would indicate the need for more specialist help include self-harm or suicide attempts, disordered eating, obsessive-compulsive behaviour, becoming selectively mute or any significant developmental regression. These types of behaviour may emerge swiftly or over a period of time. In such cases, communicate clearly to the young person what is going to happen next and maintain the same relationship with them as you guide them on to the next step.
There is no harm in asking for advice from medical or psychological professionals without actually referring the child directly to be seen by them. Use the initiative that comes with working with young people; if you are worried about a child’s behaviour, ask for help.

Just be there

The feelings that occur within us when someone dies—of abandonment, loneliness and devastation—are emotions that stem from having a very important person become suddenly very absent. After such an experience, it’s obvious that we will reach out to other people who are still around. Because of this, just being present for the child or young person could be the only thing, but one of the best things, that you do for them. Nothing else really needs to be said; everything else pales into insignificance alongside the fact that the child or young person will need you just to be there.

You may well be in for the long haul. You may feel as if you’re the only person who is being present for them, but that puts you in a very privileged and honoured position. Just be there.

Obviously, there are other things that are important to bear in mind when working with a bereaved child or young person, but this short chapter will have helped you with some of the basics. It may seem like a bit of a no-brainer—but that’s the idea! The pointers that you’ve just read will stick in the back of your head until they’re needed, the hope being that you will be reminded of them before a mistake is made.
The top ten dos and don’ts

1. Do be present. Let the child or young person know that you are there for them and that you will continue to be there for them. It’s simple: all you have to do is continue to do what you’re doing.

2. Don’t change the way that you act around the child or young person. They are no different now because of what has happened. It may be difficult to communicate this to them when everyone else is showing them the opposite. Be that difference!

3. Do tell the truth. It is often the case, especially when working with younger children, that adults try to sugarcoat a bereavement by using terms that aren’t exactly true or helpful. As hard as it might be, sensitively and appropriately telling children and young people everything they need to know is one of the best things for them.

4. Don’t panic. You may be new at bereavement support, or you may not have known the child or young person very long before having to support them in this way, but it’s not something to be scared of. Just care for them and you won’t go very far wrong.

5. Do take your lead from them. The child or young person will most probably have an idea of what is best for them, and will definitely know what feels best for them. Listen to them and follow their lead.

6. Don’t ignore the issue. Obviously you don’t want to bombard the child or young person with questions about how they are feeling and what is going on, but equally you don’t want to avoid any mention of the situation completely. It could just be a subtle word that’s needed to let them know you are around if they need to talk.
7. **Do** maintain boundaries and discipline. You may feel that you don’t want to discipline the child or young person, or that any bad behaviour is excusable because of their circumstances. But sensitively maintaining the same level of boundaries and discipline as before the bereavement could help the child or young person to feel more settled and supported.

8. **Don’t** say it’s normal. Aside from the fact that nobody can really define ‘normal’ in any context, the situation that these children and young people find themselves in is not normal, so their feelings are not normal either. It can be natural to react in a certain way, given the situation, but things are not normal.

9. **Do** pray. This may seem like the most obvious point on the list, but it will be one of the most useful things you can do for the child or young person that you are supporting. They may not want to pray, or may be currently unable to pray for themselves; you can do the praying for them. This doesn’t need to be something that they even know about; but pray anyway, and pray a lot.

10. **Don’t** expect them to be OK in a week. There may be moments, days or even whole weeks when they seem as if they are more than OK and are starting to get back to the way they were before they were bereaved. But that is because children and young people grieve in pockets; they will grieve for a time and then focus on something else. Grief will have become part of their life story, and, instead of being expected to be fine after a month, they need to be taught how to live with healthy grief as part of everyday life.
A child or young person you know has just been bereaved. Do you know them well?

Was the person who died related to the child or young person?

Did you know the person who died?

Go and see the child or young person with the rest of their family.

Address the situation with the child or young person. Are they telling you what they want to happen?

Listen to them. Take your lead from them and follow up the things they are asking for. If they request something specific, try to provide it. Make sure they know you are always available to give support.

What's next?

Wait until you next see them. Make sure they know you're available to support them. Don't force it, though.

Arrange a time to see the child or young person. Follow your own safeguarding policy and don't put them or yourself at risk.

Support the child or young person and their family in telling the school.

Suggest ways in which you could help them. Use ideas from this resource as suggestions. Make it clear that the child or young person doesn't have to do what you suggest, but they might find your ideas useful.

FINISH

Stick with it!