



Victim Support Scotland

# Support For Families Bereaved by Crime Service

A Guide for Parents  
and Carers





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# Introduction

Bereavement through murder or culpable homicide can be particularly difficult to come to terms with. Not only do you have to deal with the sudden, unexpected death, you also have to deal with the way your relative has died.

This booklet is to help you as a parent or carer to support your children through this difficult time.

## Support for children and young people

**The Support for Families Bereaved by Crime service (SFBC) can offer different types of support depending on the age of your child.**

**0-11 years old:** We offer indirect support to children through parents/carers. We can provide advice, guidance and resources for you to recognise the impact of a traumatic bereavement on your child and implement strategies to best support them.

**12-15 years old:** We can offer direct support to children and young people aged 12-15 years. Parents/carers must be informed that the support is being provided, but they do not have to be present for the support sessions.

**16+ years:** We can offer direct support and parents/carers do not have to be informed or involved in any way.

# What to say

Explaining to a child that someone has died by murder or culpable homicide is one of the most difficult situations that a parent or carer will ever face. It is natural to want to protect your children from the details. However, media interest, police involvement, rumours on social media, school playground gossip and overheard conversations at home can all lead to children finding out the truth by accident, or even worse, hearing something that isn't true. In addition, children can sometimes imagine something worse or entirely different than what has actually happened.

Many parents are worried about 'opening a can of worms'. However, try to remember that the worst thing has already happened. Being truthful and honest will allow your child to trust you enough to open up, express their emotions safely and ask you questions. It is best they learn what happened from someone they trust in a safe space.

**Be honest and consistent.  
Use simple words they understand.**

**Give bite-sized pieces of information and ask if they are ready to hear the next bit before moving on. This will give them some control over the situation and help to stop them from being overwhelmed.**

**Give space for them to ask questions.  
Answering as honestly as you can will help them to fill in the gaps, without searching for answers elsewhere.**

**Don't feel you have to tell children everything all at once.  
Reassure them you will keep them informed as you hear more from the Police.**

**Don't feel guilty if you are not in the right headspace to have these difficult conversations with your children alone. Is there is another family member or close friend who could support you with this?**

# What to say

**Winston's Wish** has set out six stages to help talk about murder with children and young people.

We have included brief examples of what you could say at each stage. These will be completely different depending on the circumstances of the murder and the age and stage of your child.

Speak to your Key Support Worker if you want to talk about how to explain your specific situation.

## 1. Explain that the person has died

It is best to use the word died, instead of gone to sleep or passed.

This ensures they know this is permanent and the person isn't coming back.

*'I have something really sad to tell you. Dad died today.'*

## 2. Give simple details about the death

You are in control of how much information you give children, keep the story simple and give appropriate details so children do not fill in the gaps for themselves.

*'Your sister died in the kitchen in her house.'*

## 3. Say the person has died as a result of murder

The explanation you give will be different depending on the circumstances.

*'The police believe that Mum was killed by a man she had been seeing recently. There seems to have been an argument and he used his strength to kill her.'*

## 4. Provide a more detailed description of how the person died

If said gently, simply and factually this can help a child piece everything together. Take your time and go at their pace.

*'Your Grandad was attacked by a group of people who punched and kicked him until he couldn't breathe anymore and was too badly hurt to live.'*

## 5. Explain the process that will now be followed

It is important for children to have some understanding of what is happening and when.

There will likely be a police investigation and there could be a criminal trial.

It is important to stay in constant communication with the Police and keep children and young people appropriately informed, depending on their age.

## 6. Talk about the person who committed the crime

Children may be reassured to know that someone has been charged and is in police custody.

If the perpetrator has not been found, try to make sure the child feels a sense of security and safety. If the perpetrator is known to the child this can complicate matters. Make sure they know it is ok to be confused and give them space to talk about how they feel.

# Common reactions to grief and trauma

The murder of a family member is a traumatic experience for any child or young person. Children want to feel safe after a traumatic event. Being there to reassure and support them is important. Children can ‘jump in and out of grief’ much more readily than adults. As children reach each age/stage it is common for them to “re-experience” their grief as their understanding of the concept of death progresses.

Here is a table explaining how children at different ages understand and react to trauma and grief:

AGE	UNDERSTANDING	COMMON EMOTIONS AND REACTIONS
0 - 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited/no understanding of death</li> <li>- Awareness that someone important is missing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- May experience a sense of abandonment and separation anxiety</li> <li>- Regression</li> <li>- Feeding/eating routine disrupted</li> <li>- Increased tantrums</li> </ul>
2 - 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Don't understand death is permanent</li> <li>- May ask questions about when the person is coming back</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- May be anxious being left with unfamiliar adults</li> <li>- May ask lots of questions to try to make sense of what has happened</li> <li>- Regression: may return to bed wetting</li> </ul>
5 - 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Start to understand death is permanent and irreversible</li> <li>- Their imagination means they may believe their actions or thoughts caused the death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anxious about their own (and others) safety</li> <li>- May have strong emotional reactions e.g. anger, sadness</li> <li>- Behavioural issues: ‘acting out’ or getting into trouble at school</li> <li>- Not wanting to go to school or being separated from adults</li> </ul>
9 - 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Now understand the finality of death</li> <li>- Start to realise that the person won't be around for important milestones</li> <li>- Outlook on world has changed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong emotional releases like anger or distress</li> <li>- Developed the language to express how they feel but may worry about upsetting others, therefore won't open up and talk about the death</li> <li>- May withdraw and spend more time alone</li> <li>- May want to spend more time with peers</li> </ul>
11+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developmentally this is a time of huge change</li> <li>- Don't like being ‘different’ from their peers: being a bereaved young person can be extremely isolating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- May find the intensity of emotions overwhelming and not know how to express how they feel</li> <li>- They can worry about ‘losing control’ of their emotions</li> <li>- Bereaved teenagers can act in very different ways e.g. becoming withdrawn, isolated, acting out in school or displaying risk-taking behaviours</li> <li>- May wish to spend more time talking with peers than family</li> </ul>



# Funerals and saying goodbye

**There are additional issues to consider regarding the funeral when someone is murdered:**

- The funeral may be delayed due to post-mortems and delays to the body being released
- There may be media interest on the day of the funeral
- An open coffin may not be appropriate due to injuries sustained or the length of time the body was held

## **Choice**

You may not know whether to allow your child to attend the funeral or view the body. The most helpful thing a parent or carer can do during this time is give children choice. Ask children directly if they would like to attend the funeral. Some children feel like it is a good opportunity to say goodbye, whereas others don't want to go. Children can feel resentful later in life if they are not allowed to go. Likewise, they shouldn't be criticised for not wishing to attend. It is also important to allow children to change their mind and make a decision to leave early if they need to.

## **Preparation**

If your child does choose to view the body, it can be helpful to talk to them before about how the body may look and any injuries they'll see. It can be helpful to prepare children for the funeral by explaining what will happen, what they will see, and why things are happening the way they are. For example, many children don't know what words like "hearse", "coffin" and "crematorium" mean. It can be helpful to explain these things before the funeral so that there is no additional confusion. If there is going to be a reception after the funeral, it can be helpful to explain what this is and why you are doing it. Children can become confused at the idea that there is a party after a funeral. You can explain that it is good to get together with other people to share happy memories of the person who has died.

## **Showing your emotions**

Parents often worry about managing their own emotions on the day of the funeral. It is ok for children to see you express your emotions on the day, this allows them to see it is ok to cry and say goodbye. Perhaps you could also have another family member or friend who also takes responsibility for looking after them on the day. This can put your mind at ease that they are being well supported and can leave whenever they want to.

## **Alternative ways to say goodbye**

If a decision is made for a child not to attend the funeral, there are other ways they can choose to be involved in the funeral or memorial process:

- Choosing special items to put in the coffin like toys, drawings or teddy bears
- Selecting flowers, music, poems or readings for the funeral
- Releasing balloons or planting a tree



# Court

If the case proceeds to trial, there will be a trial in a High Court and there may be media interest. This can be months or even years after the murder and can often bring up strong emotions for the family. Therefore, it is important to prepare children and young people for this.

## What happens if your child witnessed the crime and has to give evidence?

The court will decide how a child will give evidence, for example behind a screen or by video link. More information on the court proceedings will be given to you by your VIA officer.

## What age can young people attend a trial to watch proceedings?

Children aged 14 years and over can attend court as a victim of a crime. If someone younger than that wished to attend court as a victim of a crime, permission could be sought if it was felt appropriate. If you have any questions or concerns about this, please contact your VIA Officer.

# Social media and the news

Depending on the age of your child, they may use social media. We have found that social media can be rife with stories and rumours about the case. It is not always possible to stop children using social media. However, make them aware of the benefits of taking some time away if it is becoming too much.

On the other hand, social media can be a nice way for children to remember someone by looking through old photos or videos and reading nice comments about the person who has died.

The story may also be reported in the news. This can be upsetting and confusing for children. Make them aware that not everything written in the press is true and they can talk to you if they read or see something that upsets them.



# Practical tips

## DAILY ROUTINE

Children respond well to routine, and this can be the stability they need in a time of great instability and uncertainty. Children often find it beneficial to continue attending school as it is somewhere they can be themselves and have time away from the grief at home. However, they may also need extra cuddles, time off school or time to rest after a traumatic bereavement.

## BEDTIME ROUTINE

Children can have issues with sleep after a traumatic bereavement; having nightmares, struggling to sleep alone or staying up all night worrying.

Children often feel safe in bed at night, and therefore choose this time to ask questions. Use this time to reassure them that they are safe.

## FILMS

Watching familiar or uplifting films can be reassuring for children. There are also some films about emotions, death or grief that can help children understand how they are feeling, some examples are: Inside Out, Up, Soul, Coco and Big Hero 6.

## MUSIC

Listening to music can be a huge escape for children. Allow them to listen to their favourite music, whether that is upbeat songs to lift them up or sad songs that they can relate to. Help them make a playlist of songs that they can listen to when they are sad.

## REMEMBER

Allow children to remember the person who has died.

Support them to make a memories box, create a memories book, look at old photos, decorate a pebble to lay at the grave or write goodbye letters to the person who has died.

## HAVE FUN

We know this may feel strange, inappropriate and upsetting, however, it is ok to have fun with your children after a murder. Children will continue to make you laugh and they can be the joy that you need during this awful time. Children can feel guilty for having fun or being happy following a death. Encourage them to have fun and make sure you have fun as well to show them that it is ok.

# Other support

## Nursery or School

We would recommend that you talk to the school to let them know what has happened. This means they are aware and can support your child by looking out for any changes in behaviour, checking in with them regularly or allowing them time away from the busy classroom if needed. They can also make a referral to a school counsellor if this is necessary. Ensure there is one key point of contact to liaise with at school or nursery. This will ensure that you don't have to continually repeat the story and can help to avoid things being missed when communication is inconsistent.

## Examples of questions to discuss with your child and school

Ask your child what they want to do when it comes to telling their school and friends that there has been a bereavement (and more specifically a murder). Do they want to tell people or not? Do they need help or would they like to do it alone? How can teachers and support staff help?

## GP and additional support services

We would recommend that you reach out to your GP if your child is struggling. They can make onward referrals to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health) or other support services if needed. If your child is involved with Social Work, Mental Health Services, Special Educational Needs or Child's Health, it is recommended they are informed of the situation so they can tailor their support.

SFBC key support workers can help you to prioritise, plan and approach schools, GPs and other support services. We can help you think of questions you want to ask, facilitate meetings or advocate on your behalf if you are unable to do this yourself. We can also make referrals to the below specialist support services or support you to reach out to self-refer.

Service	Details	Website	Helpline
<b>Child Bereavement UK</b>	CBUK helps families to rebuild their lives when a child grieves or when a child dies. They offer face-to-face, online and telephone support for families in Scotland.	<a href="http://www.childbereavementuk.org/">www.childbereavementuk.org/</a>	FREEPHONE 0800 028 8840
<b>Winston's Wish</b>	Winston's Wish supports children and young people after the death of someone close to them. They offer telephone support for families in Scotland.	<a href="http://www.winstonswish.org/">www.winstonswish.org/</a>	FREEPHONE 0808 802 0021
<b>Richmond's Hope</b>	Richmond's Hope is a project for bereaved children, young people and their families. They offer face-to-face and telephone support to families in the Glasgow and Edinburgh area.	<a href="http://www.richmondshope.org.uk/">www.richmondshope.org.uk/</a>	Glasgow: 0141 230 6123  Edinburgh: 0131 661 6818



# Looking after yourself

Please remember to look after yourself during this time. You have also suffered a traumatic bereavement.

It is ok to grieve and allow your children to see your grief.

The last thing we want is for you to feel guilty that you are not doing enough to support your child. Please reach out for help if you need it.

Friends, family, school and your key worker are all there to support you during this distressing time and help you to best support your child.

# Special thanks to

- Child Bereavement UK, Richmond's Hope and Winston's Wish and Betsy de Thierry for reviewing this booklet and providing valuable feedback.
- To the many families we support who have shared their experiences and provided us with ongoing feedback, knowledge and ideas.

**We hope this booklet will help  
you to feel more confident  
whensupporting a child or  
young person after a traumatic  
bereavement.**

[www.victimsupportsco.org.uk](http://www.victimsupportsco.org.uk)  
National Helpline: 0800 160 1985

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