

# Parenting Positively

Coping with

# DEATH

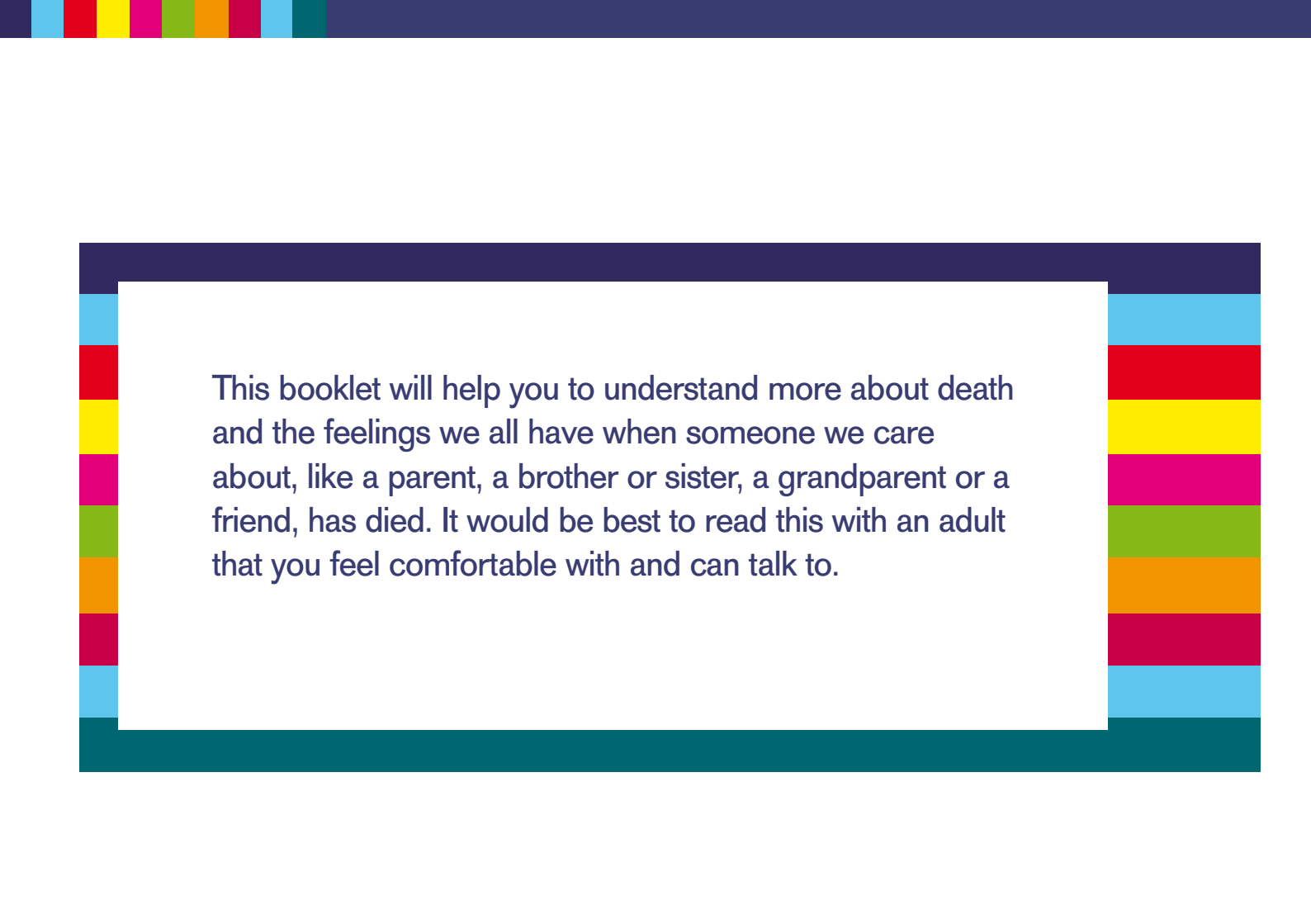
For children aged 6 to 12



Family Support Agency



Barnardos  
No child gets left behind



This booklet will help you to understand more about death and the feelings we all have when someone we care about, like a parent, a brother or sister, a grandparent or a friend, has died. It would be best to read this with an adult that you feel comfortable with and can talk to.

# I have so many questions

Why do people die?

What does dead mean?

What can help me to feel better?

Do people ever feel better after someone dies?



Why don't people talk about death?

What happens after someone dies?

What is a funeral?  
What happens at it?

How will I feel?

## Being alive

To understand about death, we must first understand what it means to be alive. Every living thing has a beginning and a time to be alive. When we are alive, our body is busy at work – we breathe, eat, see, smell, hear, touch, taste, play, talk, think, feel and grow.



## What does *dead* mean?

Death is a natural part of life. All living things are born, live, grow and then will die.

Death happens when the body stops working and the life goes out of it. The heart stops beating and breathing stops. The brain doesn't work anymore. The dead person can no longer see, hear, touch, taste, smell, eat, play, talk, move, think or feel.

People who are dead may look like they are asleep but they aren't sleeping and they can't wake up.

## Why do people die?

**Death happens for different reasons. Usually people live for a long time.**

As adults grow old, their bodies start to slow down and wear out. Their bodies may be too old to work anymore.

**Sometimes a person may die after a serious illness or if they have been badly hurt in an accident, no matter what age he or she is.**

Even when doctors and nurses do everything they can to help, the person does not get better. A life can be very long or very short. Even someone just born may not be strong or healthy enough to stay alive.

**Sometimes we know that a person is going to die and sometimes it is a complete shock.**

For example, a person could die suddenly in an accident. Some people's lives end violently such as in a war, and sometimes, though not too often, when one person kills another person.

**It can also happen that a person kills him or herself.**

This is called suicide. Suicide is especially difficult to understand. It is important to know that no matter what might have happened before the person ended his or her life that neither you nor anybody else is to blame. Even if you didn't get on well with the person who died, your actions had nothing to do with his or her death.

## Why don't people talk about death or tell the truth about it?

Lots of people are frightened of death and of the pain of the feelings of loss.

Sometimes people think that if they don't talk about the death, they can pretend that it didn't happen. They think that not talking about it will stop them feeling their own sadness and hurt, or that it will protect other people from feeling sad. They may find it hard to put their feelings into words or to find the right way to explain what has happened.

You need to be allowed to ask questions and to talk and be listened to.



## What happens after someone dies?

There are things about death and dying that are very hard to understand, even for adults. You may have heard different things about what happens after death.

No one can know for sure what comes after death, but almost everyone has ideas about it. For example, some people believe that each person has a soul or spirit which leaves the body of the person who has died and goes to heaven. People imagine heaven in different ways.

Other people think that death is the end of one life but the beginning of another. They think that we live, we die and then we are born again as a different person or as an animal or bird.



There are those who believe that when a body dies that nothing else follows, that there is no afterlife.

If you have questions about it, ask your family, your teacher, or if you go to church you could ask someone there like the priest or religious leader.

Whatever their beliefs, most people agree that people do live on after their death in the memories and hearts of those who loved them.





## What is a funeral and what happens at it?

Whatever your beliefs, there are special ways that help us to understand that the person has died. A funeral is a special ceremony and is often held in a church or other religious building like a mosque. It is a time for people to come together to remember or say goodbye to the person who has died. There may be prayers, talking, music or quiet.

In most countries, dead people are taken to a special place. Some people's bodies get buried in a grave. Some people's bodies get cremated (burnt). The cremated person's ashes can be buried or put in a special place, maybe somewhere that the person loved.

There may be a headstone or cross that marks the grave. People can come to visit this place. Some people like to say prayers, others like to bring things, such as flowers or something they have made for the person who has died.



## How will I feel?

Although most of us have seen people die on the television, when it happens to someone special to us, it is very different.

Everyone reacts differently to a death. It depends on many things such as how close you were to the dead person. Maybe you won't feel much straight away. Feelings may come out later.

The time after the death of someone close is sometimes called a time of grief and the feelings we have are called feelings of grief.



Maybe you will cry a lot.

Maybe you won't cry at all. Either is okay. If someone dies very suddenly, it is a huge shock. You might feel numb and find it hard to believe what has happened. You may even find it hard to eat, sleep, talk, play or do your school work. Some people get pains or feel sick or have bad dreams.

## You may feel angry.

You might think that it's not fair that the person you loved has died. It is usual to feel angry with other people or yourself for lots of different reasons. Some people feel angry if they didn't have the chance to say goodbye to the person who died. Others feel angry with them for making other people sad. It is normal to feel cross with the person who has died for no longer being with you.

## You might feel lonely.

You can miss not having the person about so much. You might miss doing the everyday things you used to do together like reading a story at bedtime or having breakfast. You might miss them coming to watch your school play or watching you play a match. You might feel extra lonely on special days like birthdays or Christmas time.



## Nearly everybody feels scared or worried.

They get frightened that other special people might die. Children worry about who will look after them. Sometimes boys and girls worry that they or someone else may become ill or die too.

Sometimes people are very worried about how sad other people feel and they try very hard to look after them and make them feel better.

At times children feel that they must now be more grown-up and look after their dad or mum. Small children can even be told 'you must be the man of the house now' even though there are other adults who can help parents with their grown-up concerns.

With all these worries, it might be hard to go to sleep or even to go to school or out to play with friends. If you feel like this, talk to an adult about your worries.

## Often people feel guilty.

People sometimes feel that they were to blame for the person's death. You may feel cross with yourself about times you were angry with that person or argued when he or she was alive. But people argue even when they love each other.

You might feel bad that you did not phone or go to visit the person before he or she died, or that you did not do something you were asked to do, or were not able to cheer the person up when he or she was sad.

Sometimes in an argument people say 'I wish you were dead'. Even if the person died soon after you said something like that does not make it your fault.



## Some people also feel embarrassed and ashamed.

There can be lots of talk about the person who died. You could feel the centre of attention at school. This can make you feel very uncomfortable. It might help to talk to your teacher if you feel like this.

Sometimes people find it very hard to understand that they will not see their special person again. They might search for the person and wonder when they will return.

Sometimes people worry that the person who has died will feel pain, be lonely, sad or hungry. But when a person dies, their body is no longer working so they cannot feel these things anymore. It may be some time before you understand that the dead person can't come back again.

**You may feel all of these feelings or just confused. All these feelings are part of what is called grieving. Some days the feelings may be big and strong, like huge waves on a stormy sea. Other days they may feel more like calm, gentle ripples.**



## Do people ever feel better after someone has died?

It takes time but you will feel better one day. Grieving can take a long time or a short time. Everyone is different. When people keep their feelings hidden inside and try to pretend that nothing has happened, it can take longer for them to feel better. Feelings can be let out in lots of different ways – through exercise, sports, play, music, art, writing and talking.

Death in a family brings a lot of changes, like changes in who takes you to school, where you live or who cooks the dinner and helps you with homework. It can take time to get used to these changes.

It is okay to still play with your friends when someone special has died. You can still remember that special person even if you are enjoying yourself and having fun.



## What can help me to feel better?

Getting to know and recognise your feelings is very important. Don't be afraid to show your feelings – we all have them! You don't have to hide them. Letting others know how you are feeling and letting them support you can help. You could draw or write about how you feel.

Talking to people about your worries can help, especially as other people might have some good ideas. Just being listened to might help you to feel a little better.

Some people worry that they will forget the person who died. Looking at photographs and talking to other people who know and love the person who died may also help. Talking about the person from time to time and of the good times you shared will help to keep the memories safe. It is also important to talk about the times that were not so good.





You may also find that it helps to talk in your head to the person who has died. Even though the person has died, he or she is still special to you.

If you are afraid to go to sleep, or just get more scared at bedtime, you will find that sleeping close to somebody else helps. In time you will become less afraid. Getting lots of hugs can also help a lot.

Sometimes feeling upset can come out as angry behaviour and get you into trouble. You might shout or punish the person nearest to you when you are trying to cope with a death. But taking out unhappy feelings on others doesn't help. Talk to an adult you trust or a good friend and tell them what has happened and how you feel. It won't make the sad or difficult feelings go away but it can help you to feel better and it will help other people to understand how you feel.



Getting over a death doesn't mean forgetting. It just means that you start to feel less upset. Lots of people have said that even though they will always be a little sad, that after some time they have felt happy again and able to get on with their lives.



## Compiled by Barnardos Bereavement Counselling Service

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This series was produced by the Family Support Agency and Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

The Family Support Agency provides support to families through locally based Family Resource Centres, through supporting organisations providing Marriage, Relationship, Child and Bereavement Counselling Services and by directly providing Family Mediation through its 16 family mediation centres to couples going through a separation or divorce. It carries out research, provides information and advises the Minister on family related matters. The Family Support Agency was established as a statutory agency in 2003.

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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