

Helping children bereaved by road death

Your guide to using the book
'Someone has died in a road crash'



Produced by



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Introduction

This guide is for adults caring for children bereaved by a road crash. It is an accompaniment to the children's book **Someone has died in a road crash**. Make sure you have a copy of the children's book to hand before reading this guide.



This guide and the children's book are both written by Brake, the road safety charity, with the assistance of bereavement academics and families bereaved by road crashes.

The purpose of this guide is to help you to use the children's book more effectively and to provide general guidance on supporting children bereaved by road crashes.

It is recommended that children read *Someone has died in a road crash* with an adult. You don't need to be a professional support worker but you should be someone who can: focus on the sections most relevant to the children you are reading with; monitor children's reactions to the text and pictures; and answer questions with honesty at an age-appropriate level.

Brake provides further support and information for families bereaved by road crashes and for anyone helping these families. Call our helpline on **0808 8000 401** or go to www.brake.org.uk/victim-support.

The children's book *Someone has died in a road crash* is distributed for free by the police to children bereaved by road crashes. If you know a child who has not been given it, please call the Brake helpline on **0808 8000 401** for a free copy.

If you are grieving yourself, you may find some of the topics in the children's book and in this guide too difficult to talk about. If you don't feel able to read **Someone has died in a road crash** with children you care for, you can ask someone else to read it for you. If you need support after a road death, you can call the Brake helpline on 0808 8000 401.

The reality of road deaths

Every day children are devastated by the death of one or more family members in a road crash, creating a huge hole in their family unit. These deaths are unexpected and violent. The reality is that road crash victims are frequently crushed to death or bleed to death at the scene of the crash, or die later in hospital with horrendous internal injuries.

Sometimes, a surviving child was in the crash and witnessed family members dying, either at the scene or in hospital. A child who was in the crash may themselves have serious injuries that will last a lifetime, such as brain injury or spinal injury, or have a surviving parent or sibling who has serious injuries.

Sometimes, a child's entire family is wiped out and they are the sole survivor, meaning they are grieving and also facing the very difficult challenge of adjusting to a new life in a new home with new adult carers.

Always, a child bereaved by road death needs love and support and care to enable them to grieve and have the best chance of a full and happy life.

You can help.



How do children grieve?

Children are often described as ‘the forgotten mourners’ because they are frequently excluded from having a full and active role in the grieving process. This exclusion is usually, and misguidedly, in the belief that the less a child knows, and the more they are diverted from the topic of the death or deaths, the less it will hurt them.

In reality, children have a right to know what has happened, and a right to grieve, just like everyone else. Hiding a child from the truth is only storing up trouble and potential resentment for later. There is a wealth of academic research demonstrating that it is much better to tell children things than to keep them in the dark. Children have active imaginations and if you don’t tell them things, their imaginations might fill in the gaps with something that may be even more horrendous than the truth.¹

Children grieve in different ways at different times. At different times they may cry, get angry, be quiet, be noisy, talk about the person who died, not talk about them, and play or behave as though nothing had happened.

All these reactions and many more are natural. Your job is to help families or carers support children through their grief, answer their questions honestly, and help children feel safe and loved.



Advising parents and carers

It may be your job to give the book *Someone has died in a road crash* to an adult carer or parent and to encourage them to read it with their children.

This guide can help you explain the value of the children's book to this carer or parent and the importance of them reading it with their children. You should encourage the carer or parent to read the children's book thoroughly themselves before reading it with their children, particularly the **Listen Up, Grown Up** section at the very front of the book.

As parents or carers are also likely to be grieving, it's important that they remember to think about their own wellbeing too. Brake produces support literature for adults who have been bereaved. This is available by calling the Brake helpline on 0808 8000 401 or on the Brake website at www.brake.org.uk/victim-support.

The children's book is for all children, whatever their age.

The children's book can be read to siblings from the same family at the same time.

Brake developed *Someone has died in a road crash* to work on different levels for different aged children – older children can read the text and younger children can look at the colourful images and listen to the descriptions read by the parent or carer.

It is very important that the book appeals to children of different ages. This is because there is often more than one bereaved child in a family unit. It is very appropriate to read the book aloud to a group of siblings.

Grieving children should not be talked down to, or kept in the dark.

They should be given the opportunity to ask questions and share their feelings.

The children's book encourages discussion and honesty between children and adult carers, using simple language and an open tone. The book includes:

- Opportunities for adult carers to share information about the crash and the death(s);
- Questions for the children, to encourage them to share their feelings and thoughts;
- Opportunities for children to write down memories and carry out activities;
- A promise for carers and children to read and sign, to enable them to support each other through their grief.

These are simple ways for families in distress to share emotions and support each other.



It helps to know you are not alone

The book is narrated by two children – Tom and Amy – who have both been bereaved on the road and are grieving. Many children do not know anyone else who has been bereaved, and this can make them feel isolated. The characters Tom and Amy can help them feel they are not alone. Through simple actions Tom and Amy illustrate and describe a range of emotions from anger and sadness, to feeling better.

Often, Tom and Amy are pictured doing ordinary, every-day things, such as eating cornflakes, walking to school, and even bouncing on space hoppers. This is important, as it helps demonstrate to a bereaved child that it is possible to resume doing normal, fun things in time.



A step-by-step guide to using **Someone has died in a road crash**



Someone has died in a road crash starts with an introduction to death, shock and sadness. It then gives opportunities for frank discussion about what happened in the crash, what it feels like to die and what happens to the body. This is followed by different emotions that bereaved children often feel and how to cope. The book ends with a section on how to remember the person who has died, including space to write down memories in the book itself.

It is difficult for children to comprehend the enormity of death, and to understand why it has happened. **Why did they die?** (page 3) covers the kind of questions children may ask right away. Younger children may not grasp the finality of death and may think, unless told, that the dead person will wake up.²

I don't believe it has happened! (page 4) Children, like adults, find it hard to understand that something terrible has changed their lives forever, and will often be in complete denial about what has happened. The initial shock of the death is often replayed in the child's mind, for example on waking up each morning.³

Children may feel unwell, or be visibly very upset. Some children, particularly younger children, may not appear to react to the death at all, or may say things that seem insensitive, such as asking to go out to play straight after being told. **All about shock** (page 5) explains the emotional and physical reactions to shock and looks at comforts such as food, warmth and love. These things can help children feel better.⁴

Like adults, children dip in and out of grief, but feelings of sadness can seem overwhelming and never-ending. **Feeling sad** (page 6) shows children that their unhappiness is a normal part of the grieving process. It also reassures them that they won't feel sad forever, and that good things will happen again.^{3, 5}

Road crashes are often called 'accidents' but there is always a reason behind a crash, and it can be helpful for children to understand why it happened. After all, 'Why?' is the most common question asked by a child. **Why do road crashes happen?** (page 7) explains some of the actions that cause crashes, such as speeding and drink-driving.



What happened in the crash? (page 8) allows children to ask questions about the crash. It is better for children to know the facts than to be kept in the dark, however horrific the circumstances, because they may imagine something even worse.^{2,6}

It can be reassuring for children to know that everything possible was done to save the life of their special person. **All about the emergency services** and **All about the police** (pages 9 and 10) describes the kind of care and treatment that is given to road crash victims by paramedics, police, firefighters and doctors. Many emergency workers are happy to talk to bereaved families.² You may feel it is appropriate to find out if an emergency service is able to talk with a child and you about what happened.

Children, particularly boys, are often fascinated by the details of a death, and may want to know exactly what happened, even if this seems gory to adults. Boys are more likely to ask about the details – girls usually want to know too, but may be more reluctant to ask. **Why do road crashes kill people?** (pages 11 and 12) explains how a crash can affect parts of the body and why this can cause a person to die.

Very young children may not have been taught about death, and may be very interested in what death feels like, and whether the dead person felt any pain. **What does it feel like to die in a road crash?** (page 13) deals with children's natural curiosity about the death and re-enforces the message that dead people don't have any feelings.²

The role of A&E and Intensive Care Units are discussed in **Dying in a hospital** (page 14), to help children understand how hospitals try to save lives and why this often doesn't work when someone is hurt badly in a road crash. Families often spend torturous days, weeks or even months waiting in a hospital while doctors try to save a road crash victim's life and then ultimately fail. Being caught between hope and the likelihood of death during this time is an additional, extreme stress for families who are then ultimately bereaved.

Giving parts of a dead body to someone who is alive to help them get better (pages 15 and 16) raises the issue of transplants and how organs or tissue from a dead person can sometimes be used to help other people. For some families, it is a source of comfort to know that a dead person's body has been used to help other people live, although donation is not possible in all cases.



A step-by-step guide to using **Someone has died in a road crash**

(Continued)

Children, like adults, are often encouraged not to view a body and to remember the dead person as they were. However research suggests that it is better to give children a choice, based on clear communication of what a body will look like (some bodies are very badly damaged and do not look like the person at all).

Can I see their body? and **Seeing a body** (pages 17 and 18) help the adult carer or parent to explain what a body looks like and then gives them a chance to offer the child a choice to see or not to see a body. Viewing a dead body can help children to understand the finality of death and to say goodbye to their loved one.⁴

After a road crash, there will usually be a post-mortem to determine the cause of death. **What happens to my special person's body now?** (page 19) discusses the role of a post-mortem in finding out how the crash caused the person to die.

Children want to know what happens to the body, and may ask questions about burning bodies, or bodies decaying underground. **What happens to the body then?** (page 20) looks at the differences between burial and cremation and what each process involves.⁷

We are having a funeral (page 21) helps children to prepare for what to expect at the funeral and to open a discussion about attending. Many adults think that the formal setting of a funeral is inappropriate for a child, but children may benefit from taking part if they know what to expect.^{2,6}

A death on the road often results in criminal proceedings against a driver thought to be at fault. Children can be prepared for this process. This is particularly important for older children who may read about it in the paper, or hear other children talking about it at school. Children also need to be prepared for the fact that sometimes no one is punished. **Punishing dangerous drivers** (pages 22 and 23) tackles who is to blame for the crash, and what can happen to drivers who are at fault.

Your feelings matter more than anything (page 24) introduces pages that talk about common feelings and give tips about how to cope with those feelings. Children will experience many different feelings, thoughts and behaviours after a road death. They may have different feelings at different times, or they may have different feelings at the same time. It's important to help children understand that it's OK to grieve in different ways at different times.⁸



Common feeling 1: I want to cry (page 25) shows crying as a normal part of the grieving process. Children should be encouraged to express their emotions, instead of copying the behaviour of a parent or carer, who is 'putting on a brave front'.^{3,5}

Common feeling 2: I'm really angry (page 26) gives examples of safe ways to express anger, such as hitting a cushion. Children should be encouraged to channel their anger into behaviour that does not harm themselves or other people.^{2,4}

Common feeling 3: It was my fault (page 27) tackles common feelings of guilt children experience after a death on the road. It is vitally important to tell children they are not to blame for a death. Many children believe their thoughts or behaviour are to blame for a death, or that the crash is their fault because they were not there to prevent it.^{2,4,5,9}

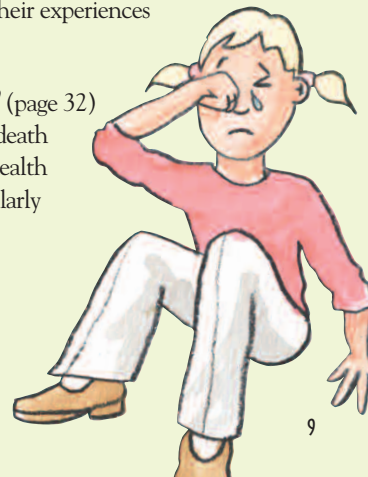
Common feeling 4: I feel alone (page 28) deals with the isolation that children often feel following a bereavement. Children can be excluded or even teased by other children because someone has died. They can also feel lonely if they do not know any other children who have lost a loved one.^{5,6,10}

Common feeling 5: Things other people say (page 29) highlights some of the insensitive sayings children hear from well-meaning friends or adults, such as 'you're the man of the house now' or 'you're young, you'll get over it'. Children may act like 'little adults' following a death, but they should not be encouraged to take on the responsibilities of the dead person.^{2,10}

Common feeling 6: I just don't want to do anything any more (page 30) deals with feelings of despondency and lack of motivation.¹¹ Encouraging children to take up a new activity or hobby can help them to feel normal again.

Common feeling 7: I can't get the crash out of my head (page 31) explores the difficult memories and thoughts children experience about the crash, whether or not they witnessed the event. Encouraging children to write down or draw their experiences can help them to make sense of their feelings.

Common feeling 8: Are other people I know going to die in a road crash? (page 32) explores the common fears that children experience following the death of someone close. Children may be excessively worried about the health of surviving relatives and friends, and will need reassurance, particularly about the dangers of roads.



A step-by-step guide to using **Someone has died in a road crash** (Continued)

It can be difficult for children to think about the future, and many worry that they will always feel sad. **When will I feel better?** and **Having fun is good for you** (pages 33 and 34) reassure children that over time they will start to feel less sad and they will have fun and feel happy again. As children find ways to cope with their grief and start to adjust to their loss, they will continue to experience different feelings, thoughts and behaviours at different times.⁸

It's important to encourage children to commemorate special occasions such as birthdays or anniversaries. **How to remember** (pages 35 and 36) deals with ways of keeping memories alive by remembering significant places or events, or creating a memory box for special mementos.^{10,12}

For practical advice about creating a memory box, go to www.winstonswish.org.

All about them (page 37) encourages children to write down the important things they remember about their special person.¹⁰ This can help them remember why the dead person was special to them.

Expressing grief creatively through drawing or writing can really benefit children. **My poem** (page 38) uses a simple formula to enable children to create their own poem about the person who died.

There are lots of things we can do to be as safe as possible on roads (page 39) aims to enable families to discuss and agree to prioritise safety when using roads. This may help to reduce natural and often intense worries that someone else may also die in a road crash.

Back to school (page 40) addresses the fact that children spend a significant part of their time at school and that bereaved children should expect and deserve recognition of their needs and appropriate support while at school. See pages 13 and 14 of this guide for more specific advice for teachers.

Children often find it hard to express their emotions, so it can be helpful to set out 'rules' allowing them to express themselves, and saying how they'd like to be treated.

Our promise (page 41) enables children to choose how their parents or carers interact with them.¹³



What else you can do to help

As well as ensuring children bereaved by road crashes have access to, and use, the children's book, there are other things you may be able to do to help their recovery significantly.

Provide practical support and information

Is there anything you can do that is practical or helps provide information? This could mean talking to a child's school or nursery teacher about a child's needs, or researching local child bereavement agencies who provide support. The Brake helpline can research support agencies for you and also advocate on behalf of a child. Call 0808 8000 401.

Child protection

If you are a professional helping a bereaved family, watch out for warning signs of bereaved parents who are struggling to cope and inform social services if you are concerned for a child's safety. Due to alcohol or drug abuse, or mental illness, some vulnerable bereaved families may be, at least temporarily, unable to care for children without support from social services, other family members, or good health care. With this support, it can be possible to prevent a complete breakdown of a family.

Mental health conditions that may require expert treatment

It is not uncommon for people - children or adults - who have been bereaved traumatically to go on to develop serious mental health conditions, such as depression or post-traumatic stress disorder. Such conditions require appropriate and expert treatment. You can help by watching out for symptoms that continue for more than a couple of months after the death, such as inability to eat, stuttering, sudden outbursts of very strong emotions, or being withdrawn. If you observe such symptoms then you should encourage the bereaved person to consult their GP and get their needs assessed, so they can obtain any appropriate treatment and go on to have a fully functioning life again, while still remembering their bereavement with sadness.



What else you can do to help (continued)

Bear in mind that some GPs are more experienced in helping suddenly bereaved people than others, and some regions may have more services for suddenly bereaved people than others. It is also worth noting that recommended treatment for conditions emerging from traumatic experience is usually talk-based expert therapy, not drugs. If you are struggling to find a health practitioner to help in a seemingly appropriate way, call the Brake helpline on 0808 8000 401 and we can give further advice or make enquiries on your behalf if you want us to.



Specific advice for teachers

Telling other pupils

Talk to the child and their carer about what they want. Some children find it helpful for a teacher to tell their class about the bereavement, but other children may choose to tell only a select group of friends themselves.

Allow time out

Let bereaved children take short breaks from class or assembly when they are upset. Give them somewhere safe and quiet they can go where there is caring adult supervision, no questions asked – such as a staff room or a medical room. Ensure all teachers understand the child can always go to this room without having to explain why.

Look for changes in performance and behaviour

Bereaved children may lose interest in their work, or become disruptive or withdrawn at any time. This could happen months or even years after a bereavement, but still be connected to the bereavement. If their performance or behaviour is out of character, consider that it may be due to the bereavement. Grief takes a long time and it is your job to be supportive, not demanding.

Talk regularly to the child's parent or carer – some children act OK at school but are very upset or disruptive at home, or vice-versa.

Inform the child's carer or parent if you notice any change in a bereaved child, so the carer or parent has an opportunity to talk to the child and to help them progress through their grief with continued love and support. It may be that the child has questions that have not been answered, or has particular concerns. Through conversation, you or their adult carer or parent may be able to resolve an issue for the child and enable that child to move forward more positively.

Case study:

Daniel knew his dad had been killed in a collision between his car and a tanker. He suddenly got very upset a year later. Through conversation, it emerged that it had struck Daniel that the tanker must have been very big, and that his dad must have been very slowly crushed to death when the tanker fell on top of his car, and his dad must have been very frightened before he died. In truth, his dad had died quickly on impact, and the tanker hadn't toppled slowly on top of the car. Daniel had never been told this. Once he knew this, he felt a bit better.



Specific advice for teachers (Continued)

Children under attack

Watch out for bullying – children can be cruel and may even tease a child who has been bereaved, particularly if the bereaved child doesn't want to take part in games or conversation because they are too upset. Sometimes, bullying can occur simply because they are seen as different now they are bereaved.

Sensitive subjects

Be aware of any activities that may spark an upsetting memory. For example, a lesson on road safety, or a lesson where children make a 'Mother's Day' or 'Father's Day' card. However, don't automatically exclude a bereaved child from such lessons. The best thing to do is to talk to the child and their carer to help them choose what they would like to do.

Case study:

Emma's class was going to make Mother's Day cards, but her mum had been killed in a road crash two years ago. Emma's teacher talked to Emma and her dad in private. Emma decided she wanted to take part in the lesson because making cards was fun, and she remembered her mum really well and wanted to carry on remembering her. Emma decided to make a card to put on her mother's grave. She decorated it with tissue paper daffodils because she remembered that these were her mum's favourite flowers.



Don't presume to know what a bereaved child would like to do. Give them ideas and choices, listen to them, and enable them to go ahead with a positive choice in a caring, supportive environment.

Further reading



A Child's Grief, Winston's Wish

Children and Bereavement, 2nd edition, Wendy Duffy

Death in the Family: Helping children to cope (factsheet),
The Royal College of Psychiatrists

Getting Over an Accident, Child Accident Prevention Trust

Good Grief: Exploring Feelings, Loss and Death with Under Elevens, Barbara Ward and Associates

Grief Encounter Workbook, Shelley Gilbert

Helping Children Cope with Death, The Dougy Center

Helping Children Cope with Grief – Facing a death in the family, Rosemary Wells

Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss, Claudia Jewett, Sudden Death Association

I Can, You Can postcards, Childhood Bereavement Network

Interventions with Bereaved Children, Susan C Smith and Sister Margaret Pennells

Life & Loss, a guide to help grieving children, Linda Goldman

Loss, Change and Grief: An educational perspective, Erica Brown

Mental Health and Growing Up (factsheets for young people, parents and carers),
The Royal College of Psychiatrists

My Father Died, Susan Wallbank, Cruse Bereavement Care

My Mother Died, Susan Wallbank, Cruse Bereavement Care

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine (early years activity book), Diana Crossley, Winston's Wish

Ordinary Days, Shattered Lives: Sudden death and the impact on children and families,
Child Bereavement Trust

Our Surviving Children, The Compassionate Friends

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: The invisible injury, David Kinchin

Sudden Death, a research base for practice, Bob Wright

Talking about Death: A dialogue between parent and child, Earl A Grollman

Talking with Children and Young People about Death and Dying, 2nd edition, Mary Turner

The Forgotten Mourners: Guidelines for working with bereaved children, 2nd edition, Susan C Smith

The Sudden Death of Our Child, The Compassionate Friends

Then, Now and Always: Supporting children as they journey through grief: A guide for practitioners,
Julie A Stokes, Winston's Wish

Waving Goodbye, The Dougy Center

When Someone Very Special Dies: Children can learn to cope with grief, Marge Heegaard

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child, The Dougy Center

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- 12 Stokes, J. (2004) *Then, Now and Always: Supporting Children as They Journey Through Grief: A Guide for Practitioners*, Winston's Wish, Cheltenham, UK
- 13 Childhood Bereavement Network, *I Can, You Can*, Childhood Bereavement Network, London, UK

Reading Well for Children books help children and their families and carers cope with feelings and worries, daily life and getting through a tough time. The books are chosen and recommended by leading health professionals, including NHS England and the Royal College of GPs, and co-produced with children and families. For more information, go to reading-well.org.uk



About Brake



This book is by the road safety charity Brake.

Brake supports families affected by road death and serious injury and also campaigns for safe and healthy mobility for all.

For more information about supporting a child bereaved through a road crash, call the Brake helpline on 0808 8000 401 or go to www.brake.org.uk/victim-support.

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We want to keep
improving this guide and
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Please send your
comments and ideas to
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