

Supporting children after a frightening event:

Frequently asked questions¹



These are some of the questions that are being asked by parents, teachers and others caring for children who are affected by the tragic event at Grenfell Tower and the media coverage of incidents such as this.

We have compiled the answers below by drawing on our experiences of supporting children, young people and families bereaved through all causes, including through tragic events, as well as, murder or manslaughter and by drawing on relevant research and literature² in this area . Please see the list of contact details for organisations at the end if you would like to ask other questions on how best to support children affected by these events or by other bereavements.

Key ideas

- Talk to children using words they understand and are appropriate for their age
- It's best to use honest, clear language if possible. It's probably best to tell children information a bit at a time, giving them the opportunity to come back with more questions. Older children will want and be able to handle more information.
- Using pictures and storybooks will help younger children or children with special needs to understand. Social Stories are helpful for children with communication difficulties
- Try and encourage children to ask questions
- Answer questions honestly and simply; talking about it won't make it worse
- Accept that some things can't be 'made better'
- Show willingness to talk about difficult things and use this as an opportunity to reassure them
- If children are asking questions, it is a good thing – it shows they trust you and it is better than keeping questions and worries to themselves

¹ With special thanks to Patsy Wagner for all her work in this area.

² Reference Winstons Wish

- Remember that ‘super parents’ or ‘super teachers’ don’t exist. Just do and say what you can
- Don’t be afraid to show children how you are feeling

The explanation can be basic, especially for young children – something like:

‘All this news is because something very, very sad happened at Grenfell Tower. What seems to have happened is that a fire broke out during the night, and many people have been injured and lost their homes or have had to move homes. We also know some people have died. It is very unusual that something like this happens. We know that it was an accidental disaster in other words it was not an act of deliberate harm. This is one of the reasons why it is on the news and lots of people are talking about it; it is also because it is very upsetting that something like this could happen. Everyone who has heard the news is very sad and worried.’

Lots of firefighters helped people to escape from the Tower. People who were injured are being treated by Doctors and Nurses in hospital and people in the local community have been really generous in donating food and clothes, and places to stay for those who have lost their home. There are so many stories of acts of kindness and courage and people working together to help and care for those that have been affected.

Should we stop children watching television coverage or seeing the newspapers?

This story is upsetting for children because they can imagine something like this happening to them or someone close to them. The temptation is to try to prevent them hearing about it. However, because other children will have heard the news, it is better for your children to have the opportunity to ask questions and receive reassurance from people they trust. Your judgement of what your child can understand is very valuable. If your children are used to watching and discussing the news with you, they may be able to watch an early news bulletin with you beside them. Encourage children to ask questions about what they are seeing and answer as well as you can.

As the days after this incident pass, there may be more coverage of people grieving. Children may well find these upsetting to watch and this may provide an opportunity for more honest communication and expression of thoughts and feelings. Online memorials and vigils in town centres to show sympathy for the people who have died and their families may also trigger questions.

Adults should listen out for Content warnings of especially distressing images and try to avoid these if possible.

(Websites and programmes such as, Newsround™, CBBC and ‘First News’ UK’s only national newspaper for young people firstnews.co.uk often present the news in more age-appropriate and “child-friendly” terms)

How can I answer when they ask 'why?'

If the children want to know 'why?' you could say something like:

“At the moment, we don't really know what caused the fire, it's so, so difficult to understand why this may happen.”

‘Structural Engineers are working really hard to find out why this happened to prevent something like this ever happening again’.

How might my child react after a traumatic event?

When something terrible happens, children may experience shock – the events may not seem real and feelings might seem frozen. Children might act as if nothing has happened or find it hard to believe something has happened. Or, children might have very strong feelings and feel and act very differently. Some children might be very upset and may want to talk about it all the time, other children may prefer to be quiet and to be on their own and some may want to try not to think about it for a while. Sadness, grief, alarm, blame, guilt, denial or disbelief are all normal responses in these circumstances. Children find their own ways of grieving.

Children might also show signs of traumatic stress. This might include unwanted pictures or images or sounds of the trauma (often called flashbacks) coming into their mind or upsetting dreams. This can happen even if they didn't actually see what happened but were told later. Children may also experience distressing physical symptoms such as the heart beating faster and dizziness. These are all normal reactions and will usually lessen over time.

My children are asking lots of questions about death. What should I say?

It is normal that children, like adults, will try and make sense of this in their own way. They will need the support of adults to do this. If you feel you can, be honest and try to avoid euphemisms (e.g. say 'died' not 'gone away'). This will avoid confusion, build trust and reassure children that it is ok to talk openly about difficult things. For young children who want specific facts about the fire, you could say something like:

‘When someone dies in a fire, they may breathe in smoke that causes their lungs to stop working. Our bodies need oxygen to make all the parts, like the heart and brain, work properly. If someone loses too much oxygen, their body stops working and they die.’

This may lead to many more questions about death and dying, and also to questions about what happens after death; for example, 'does it hurt?'. Your next sentence may depend on how the child reacts to that; some children may be simply interested, others may be upset and want more information or reassurance than this is unlikely

to happen again, and others will want to play or do something else – all are perfectly natural reactions.

When someone dies their heart stops beating and they stop breathing and they no longer feel any pain. Because they have died, the body is left behind and is buried or cremated. But, what is special about the person – their spirit and the memories we have of them – these will last for ever.

My children are now scared that I – or they – will die.

Because of the unusual and horrific details of this incident, it is natural that children will question whether this might happen where they live or to people they know. When high profile events such as this happen, young people may temporarily lose their sense of security. They may ask questions such as ‘*what would happen to me if you were killed?*’ ‘*What would happen if a fire like this happened in our home?*’ Try to answer with some solid reassurance, such as:

‘We don’t expect anything like this will ever happen here. If one of us died for any reason, you would always be looked after by _____ (the other parent/aunt/uncle/granny/family friend). I don’t expect to die for a long time yet’.

‘The firefighters will do all they can to make sure this sort of event does not happen again. It is really, really unlikely that this will happen to anyone we know. We will keep you safe’.

There are good story books for younger children that address death and provide an age-appropriate way to handle these sensitive but important conversations. Children who are concerned will appreciate a lot of reassurance and maybe more hugs than usual. Keeping a reasonably normal routine going will help them feel secure.

Will talking about it open a can of worms?

Conversations about events like these can be difficult and upsetting but afterwards you’ll probably feel relieved that you were able to be honest and build trust. Sometimes adults feel they shouldn’t get upset in front of children but, in fact, this can be really helpful to show children that it is OK to have a range of difficult emotions.

Families and professionals sometimes talk of their reluctance to ‘open a can of worms’ and risk traumatising children by talking in detail about death, especially when the death has been through violence. In our experience, it is better for children to release the ‘worms’ in a safe and steady way. This can help children feel in control of all the wriggling emotions, questions and anxieties that can otherwise eat away at them.

How much does my child understand what is being said?

Children's understanding of death and loss develops as they grow. Little children on hearing that somebody's brother has died, for example, may wonder if he can still play football on Friday – being 'dead' to a child under five means about the same as being in another country. Check that children have understood your explanations.

My child keeps play-fighting, pretending he's dying? Is that normal?

Yes it is. Children use various ways of trying to understand what has happened; one common way is to act out the scene with toys or other forms of pretend play. It is different from the way that adults cope, so it may seem that children are acting too flippantly, too casually in the face of tragedy. What they are doing is trying to understand. Children respond to grief in different ways than adults too – for adults, grief feels like a river you have to slowly wade through – or a vast sea and you cannot see the shore. For children, grief is more like puddles that are jumped into and out of quickly.

My child won't let me out of her sight – what can I do?

This is another common reaction to death, loss and high profile tragedies – children may fear that if something has happened that can't be explained, then anything can happen. With patience and extra reassurance, she will hopefully regain her confidence. Simple explanations will help. A loved toy from younger childhood could be comforting too. Worry dolls, dream-catchers and children's story books which explain death and the feelings it causes (see Suggested Reading Lists at www.winstonswish.org.uk and www.childbereavement.org.uk) can help ease night-time worries.

How long will children be affected by this?

This tragic event, especially the tributes to those who have been killed and thoughts about their family, will affect everyone. They are particularly painful and poignant for those who have experienced a bereavement who both identify with those who have just been bereaved and are also taken back, emotionally, to the raw feelings of their own bereavement. For such families, it may feel that your own previous experience of bereavement has only just happened. It will help to talk to each other about how you are feeling and don't feel you have to bottle up your feelings to protect the children – it'll help them to know that you are finding it hard too. You may find it

helpful to talk things through with a friend or one of the organisations listed at the end of these questions and answers.

The answer for individual children is also a very individual one and will depend on other losses and bereavements the child may have experienced. Non-bereaved children may only be interested and not affected. Children shouldn't be made to feel that they 'have' to feel upset about events and people they do not know.

Should I seek professional help for my child?

It is better not to bring in complete strangers to work with children at these times - they need family and people they know around them. Families benefit most from practical help in the early stages, and help in understanding the needs of their children if it seems that they are not clear on that. However, if there are concerns that a child is particularly vulnerable or seems to be experiencing an extreme reaction to the events then professional support would be appropriate.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) Post Traumatic Stress guidelines suggest that where symptoms are mild (and present for less than 4 weeks after the trauma) then a strategy of WATCHFUL WAITING as a way of managing the concerns is recommended.

In school, what do we do if the pupils are role-playing fire or death scenes?

Children communicate a lot through their behaviour and play, particularly when things are confusing, distressing, out of the ordinary and they lack the language to describe what they have seen, heard and how they are feeling. This is a normal and healthy reaction. Rather than ignore or sanction the behaviour you can use this as an opportunity to talk openly about the taboo of death and dying. This can be done by drawing, writing poetry, circle time discussions, or other creative activities. It can be an opportunity to acknowledge other bereavements and losses in the school community and provide a vehicle for bereaved pupils to feel supported by their peers and teachers. It is estimated that in Britain there is, roughly, one child per classroom bereaved of a parent or sibling (around 3.5% of the child population: or 1 in 29 of school age children). Individual conversations with children who have been bereaved, during times of such high profile coverage of deaths, can be helpful. Give them choices about what level of support and acknowledgement of their experiences would feel right for them. Several organisations listed below have resources on their websites aimed at teachers and other professionals, including school bereavement strategies and lesson plans about death and dying.

How can Winston's Wish, The Childhood Bereavement Network and other organisations help?

The Childhood Bereavement Network website has a directory of local open access services (www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/directory) which support children and young people who have been bereaved. In addition, the following organisations have a national remit to support those helping children and young people affected by death and bereavement.

Winston's Wish

Guidance, support and information for anyone caring for a bereaved child. Winston's Wish also offers particular support to those bereaved through murder or manslaughter

Head Office, 17 Royal Crescent, Cheltenham, UK, GL50 3DA

Freephone Helpline: 08088 020 021 – open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Enquiries: +44 (0) 1242 515157

Email: info@winstonswish.org.uk

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Child Bereavement UK

Guidance, support and information for anyone caring for a bereaved child

Helpline: 0800 02 888 40 – open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Email: info@childbereavement.org.uk

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Cruse

Support for the bereaved, including a network of local groups

0844 477 9400 – open Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5pm

Email: helpline@cruse.org.uk

www.cruse.org.uk

Child Death Helpline

Helpline for anyone affected by the death of a child of any age

0800 282 986

www.childdeathhelpline.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

Support for bereaved parents who have experienced the death of a child of any age and from any cause.

Phone: 0845 123 2304

E-mail: info@tcf.org.uk

www.tcf.org.uk

ChildLine

Helpline for children to talk about anything that worries them

0800 1111 24 hours a day, every day

www.childline.org.uk
