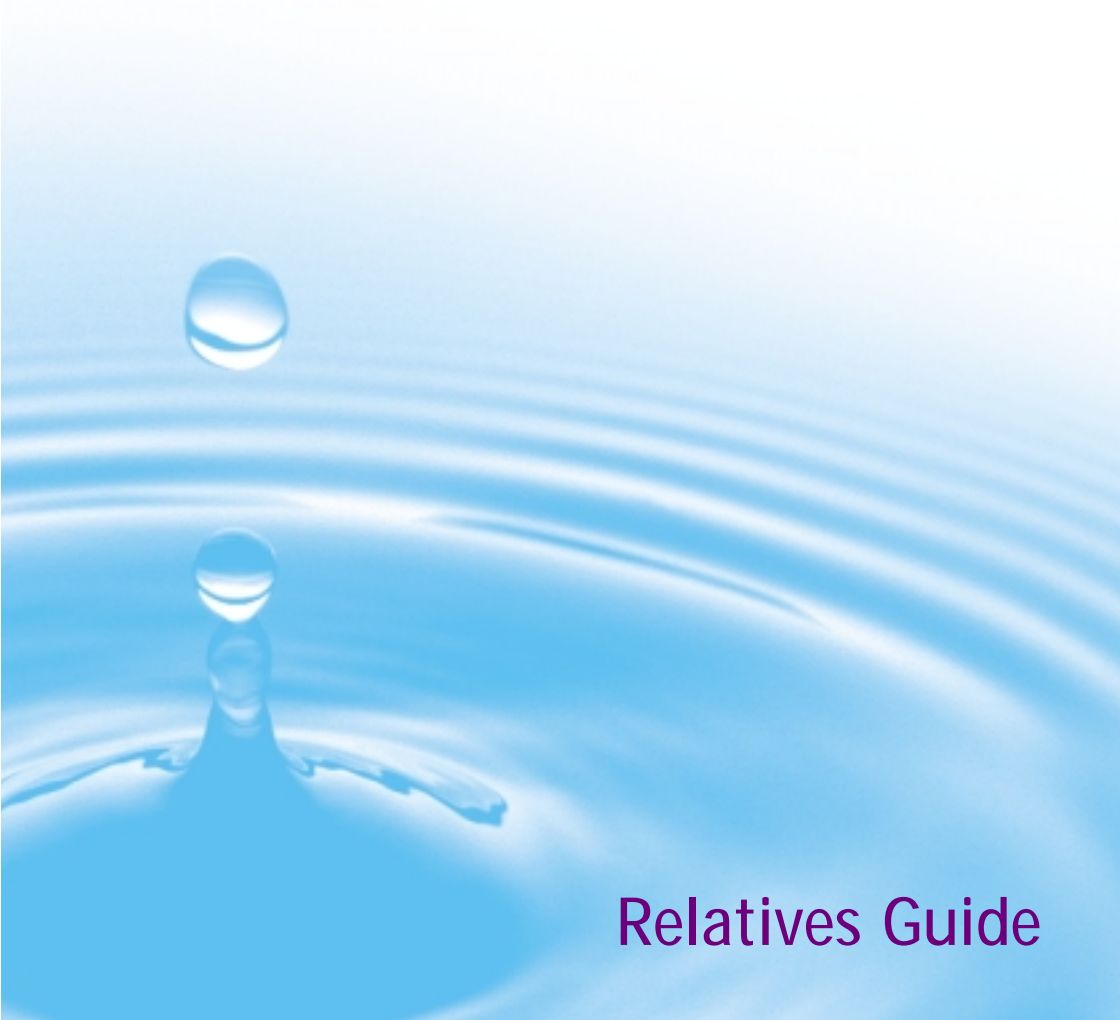


Dealing with sudden death  
in early childhood  
Ages 0-5



Relatives Guide

This booklet has been produced by:

*The* ROYAL  
HOSPITALS



**Victims Unit: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister**



## General development

Infants and young children are learning to move and understand language for the first time. They depend on you to survive and help them understand the world. They may not understand how they feel or how to tell you about it, but will act out their feelings in other ways. When they are confused about things, they need simple answers. You will need to repeat most explanations to help them remember.

Young children quickly form emotional bonds with parents. Your child may become upset if separated from you or other familiar faces: this is a sign that they are capable of grief. Young children will not understand why they feel this way or know how to talk to you about it.

Young children use play to build relationships and understand new things. It is a relaxing and enjoyable way to learn about the world. If your child cannot talk about their emotions or something that confuses them, they will act them out and learn about them through play. This is an important part of young children's grief.

Children with special needs or circumstances are similar to other children on the same level of understanding. You may find it helpful to read the guidelines in this series for children aged five to ten years old if this applies to you.

## Reactions to sudden death in the family

**Young children understand separation** – your child will usually form a strong bond with you within the first six months of life. From this point on, separation from you and other familiar faces becomes upsetting for your child. They experience death as a separation.

If a death affects the family, young children will react to the distress of people around them. The death of a parent will cause the strongest upset to young children.

**Young children don't understand death** – they don't understand that death is final. They may ask you when the person is coming back or think they might be lonely under the ground. Telling young children that death is like going on a voyage or like going to sleep will lead to confusion. Your child needs to understand that you cannot return or wake up after death.

**Young children need to understand what happened** – your child may ask why the person died, or act out bits of what happened when they are playing (using toys to play different roles). This helps them understand confusing or scary parts of what happened.

**Children make up their own explanations for what they don't understand** – they may secretly think that the person died because of something they did or said (like being angry or bold before the person died). They may also believe that you can make everything go back to the way it was before. They are looking for simple explanations to help make sense of what happened, and will believe them to be true until you help them understand.


**Sudden events frighten young children** – they feel scared and helpless when they are threatened, and worry more about their safety afterwards. If your child is more easily scared or irritated, this is because their bodies react strongly to feeling unsafe or threatened. They will rely on you to calm them down and take their fears seriously.

**Young children will remember what happened** – some memories of what happened (or what your child thinks happened) are hard to forget. You will not always know how much your child thinks about these. Some things that they see, hear, smell, or feel will remind them of it. Loud noises or sudden shocks may make them feel unsafe without knowing why. They may think about what happened at quiet times of the day or night.

**Young children feel stress** – if your child feels frightened or unsafe when they think about what happened, this uses energy that would normally be used for play, exercise, or learning. The longer they stay frightened or worried, the more energy they use each time. Over days and weeks this can drain your child's body, and leave it open to illness or injury.

**Young children are stressed by changes in routine** – mealtimes, bedtime, naps, play, and pre-school are parts of your child's day that make them feel secure. Sudden death disturbs these routines. Your child will feel safest when they are with you and they know what to expect.

**Children don't think about the future** – your child may continue playing or not be upset when they hear that someone has died. They do



not understand the full consequences of death, and what it will mean to them later. They are likely to think about the death during quieter or less active times (e.g. at bedtime).

## What makes things worse?

**Witnessing a sudden death** – is very frightening for your child who will need explanations and reassurance about what happened. Young children will not understand what has occurred. They will remember in detail many things that they see, hear, smell, taste, or feel at the time. This can make them feel very unsafe and stop your child from coming to terms with what happened.

**Not understanding what has happened** – your child may think they are responsible in some way for what happened, or that they could have prevented it by doing something differently. They may think the person who died can still see or hear them, although they might not share these beliefs. Children need to be reassured that there is nothing magical about death and that they are not to blame.

**Young children are good observers** – children watch and listen closely to your reactions. If you are upset, they will probably become frightened and upset too. They may be more affected than they seem if they sense strong anger, sadness, or worry in you or another family member. Your child needs to see adult grief and sadness in a safe place where they are free to ask questions.

**Young children can hide what they are thinking** – your child may hide their feelings because they don't want to think about them or they don't want to upset you. Younger children may not have the words to tell you how they feel. Your child needs to know they can talk to you about their feelings even if what they have to say is upsetting.

**Feeling unsafe** – some children feel very unsafe after a sudden death. Safety routines (such as locking doors, checking windows, turning on alarms, leaving a light on) at night can help your child feel safer. Make sure your child feels safe at home, pre-school, or in playgroups.

## Children with special needs or circumstances

Children with special needs or circumstances react to sudden death according to their levels of understanding and emotional support. They will recover with care and support. They need simple explanations of death and trauma, and encouragement to talk and ask questions. You may wish to refer to other guidelines which better reflect the level of understanding or behaviours of your child.

### Guidelines

It is important to remember that your child is more sensitive to the family's emotions than they seem. Young children constantly watch the reactions of those around them and will become upset if adults act in ways they don't understand.


### Immediate needs

**Young children need to feel safe** – immediately after a sudden death and in the long term. Avoid unnecessary separations, give affection, and reassure your child that they are safe.

- Have consistent routines at home, in pre-school, or for playgroups.
- Return to daily routines quickly.
- Avoid unnecessary separations – where separations are necessary they should be planned and predictable for your child.
- Give hugs and cuddles emotional reassurance.
- Have a safety routine for your child (checking doors and windows at night).
- Take your child's fears about safety seriously.

**Clear communication** – younger children need simple explanations about death. Death is best explained to your child as meaning that a person stops moving and thinking. Their hair and fingernails don't grow and they don't breathe or feel pain. You need to use your own beliefs to explain that whatever happens to people after death, once a person dies they cannot come back to life. You can teach your child about death directly or by using simple stories.

- Explain the meaning of death as early and immediately as possible, and repeat this explanation when your child needs it.

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- Use the families belief systems to explain death
  - Use language and ideas you know they will understand – clear and not misleading.
  - Be consistent so that your child will not be confused.

**Make the loss real** – encourage your child to take part in mourning ceremonies (e.g. funerals), and talk to them about what they will see. Don't hide your feelings or the feelings of others, and be patient when they have questions. Encourage them to do something personal for the person who died with you or the family. Keepsakes of the person who died can be very special.

- Let your child take part in mourning rituals (seeing the person who died, funeral). Tell them what will happen before they go.
- Encourage them to do something for the person who died (putting a drawing, letter, or present for the person who died on the coffin).
- Hold onto keepsakes and photos for your child (they may want to have their own keepsake).
- Do not hide your feelings but remember that strong emotional reactions from adults will upset your child.

## Long term needs

**Understanding** – your child may only want to ask questions on things they are confused about (such as why people cannot come back to life). They may act out what happened through play. This can sometimes upset parents, but is a sign that children are working through confusing or emotional topics. Look through photo albums together and let your child visit the grave.

- Talk about what happened. Your child will ask more questions about things that are confusing.
- Use simple and truthful answers. You may need to repeat these to help them understand.
- You can check what your child understands by asking them to tell you about what they think happened.
- Short talks about what happened are helpful.
- Your child may act out what happened through play – this is normal and helps children understand.

- Visit the grave and other places where your child feels close to the person who died.

**Coping with emotions** – talk to your child about their feelings.

Take their fears seriously. Give them reassurance and affection.

- Take your child's fears seriously. Talk to them and give them support.
- If your child has guilt feelings, help them see that they are not to blame.
- Remember that it is easier to find out what young children are thinking or feeling by watching them play and asking simple questions.
- Soothe and reassure them that what they are feeling is normal and will get better with time.
- Let them know it is okay to have fun and play.
- Help your children cope in simple ways (through art, storytelling, play).


**Let other people know** – teachers, carers, and other adults in the community can support your child in returning to normal life outside the home. They can prepare friends and other children, and answer their questions.

- Contact school or pre-school and let them know what has happened.
- Talk to adults in the neighbourhood or community who are important to your child.
- Be prepared for any questions they have.

**Get your child back to old routines or make new ones** – change and lack of routine upsets young children. They feel safest when they know what to do and what to expect. Young children like predictability in people, places, times, and activities, and benefit from sharing routines with you. Get your child back to old routines or make new ones as soon as possible. Routines should include:

- Bedtime routines: familiar or enjoyable activities leading up to bedtime (stories, brushing teeth)
- Mealtimes planned at same time and place each day
- Return to playgroups or other activities
- Playtime with friends





**Deal with reminders** – some things will remind your child of the sudden death or build up unpleasant feelings and worries. Make sure your child has regular breaks from things that remind them of what happened and a safe place to go to where they can play or relax.

- Be aware of what things are likely to remind your child of what happened.
- Avoid the ones you can and have a plan to cope with those you have to come in contact with.
- Talk with your child about what they can do to feel okay when they are reminded of what happened.
- Reassure your child that things will get better with time.
- Prepare for anniversaries, birthdays, or special occasions.

**Look after yourself** – your health and wellbeing is very important to the wellbeing of your child. Accept help from other people, make some time for yourself, and talk about how you feel.

- Accept help from other people
- Be aware that how you feel will affect how your child feels
- Remember that you cannot look after your child without looking after yourself too.

**Growing up** – your child will understand more about the world as they grow up. They may feel differently about what happened as they understand more. Keepsakes and anniversaries will be special to your child in the future.

- Let your child change how they feel about what happened as they understand more.
- Expect more complicated questions as your child gets older.
- Reassure your child that these changes are normal and won't last forever.
- Anniversaries, birthdays, and other occasions will have a special meaning in future.
- Be optimistic about the future.

<sup>1</sup> see adult guidelines in this series

## The future

Grief is different for each child, so it is difficult to say much about the future. Sudden death can be shocking, and change a child's life forever. However, most young children will get through this with time, affection, and the support of their family. The most intense grief and upset will usually be experienced within the first two years.

Your child will think about the person who died many times as they grow older. They may have more questions or different feelings about what happened. Consistent routines at home and pre-school are as important as fun and play in helping your child cope and feel safe. Talking, remembering, and sharing feelings with your child will help them understand what has happened.

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