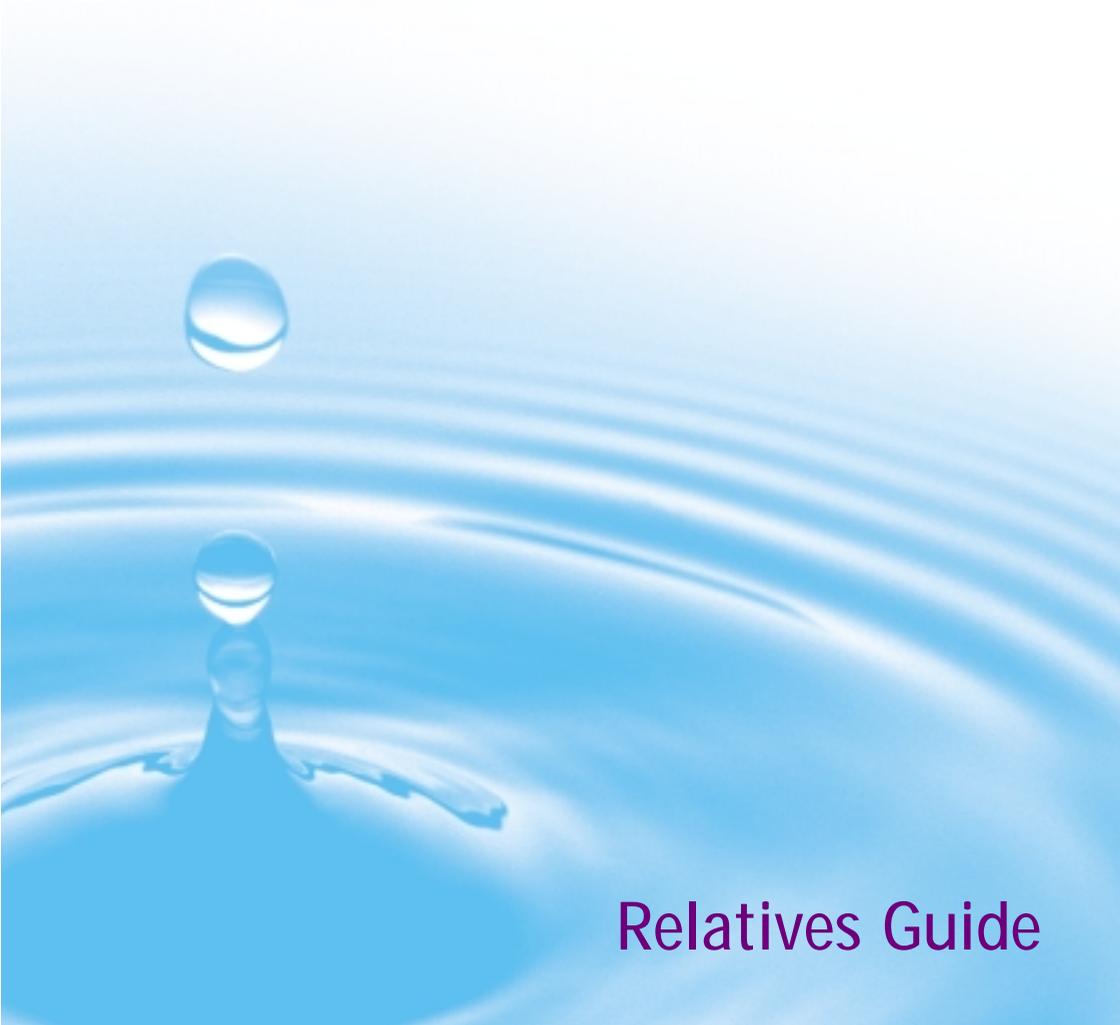


Dealing with sudden death
in middle childhood
Ages 5-10



Relatives Guide

This booklet has been produced by:

The ROYAL
HOSPITALS



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



Children's development

Children between 5 and 10 years of age are learning to understand the world around them. Their language and understanding develops gradually during this time, but at different rates for each child. It is helpful to work out how much your child understands and what language you need to use to help them understand.

Children are very good observers – they pay attention to what people do not what they say, and often work out their own meanings for things. You may need to know what explanations your child has, which you can do by listening to the questions they ask or by asking them simple questions such as: what do you think happened?...how do you think that works?

Children of this age enjoy spending time outside the family at school or with friends. When they become frightened or worried they may want to spend more time close to their family.

Children like rules and want things to be fair. They enjoy playing games but do not like others breaking the rules. They may ask “why me?” or “why my family?” when something goes wrong.

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 younger (0-4 years) or older (adolescent) children if this applies to you.

Reactions to sudden death

Children understand separation – your child will react when separated from you or people they spend a lot of time with. They will be upset even if they don't understand what death means or what has happened.

Death is unavoidable and irreversible – between the ages of five and seven years, your child will begin understanding that death happens to everyone at some point and that you cannot bring someone back from the dead. Before this, they are likely to believe people can return. You need to be aware of how your child understands death.

Children don't think about their own death – your child won't like to think about their own death or the death of others around them in a realistic sense. This is helpful to them and should be encouraged.

Children need to understand – your child may want to know “why me?” or “why my family?” and feel that things are unfair. They may act out what happened in their heads or through play, sometimes changing the story or saving the person who died. This is normal when children are working through something that confuses them. Expect questions and short conversations about what happened as children learn more.

Children are superstitious – your child may still believe that the person who died can still see or hear them; either closely or from a distance. This can be either comforting or upsetting for them. Your child may believe that they caused the death by something they did or thought (like being angry or bold before the person died). Simple and clear explanations from you can help them understand what happened.

Sudden death frightens children – children 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.

Young children feel stress – if your child is under stress, it may affect their friendships, sleeping, concentration, and school. Some children will be quieter when stressed; others will act out more. Stress and upset in the family will also affect them.

Children are stressed by changes in routine – mealtimes, bedtime, chores, play, and school are predictable parts of your child’s day which make them feel secure. A sudden death can disturb these routines. Your child will feel safest when they are with you and they know what to expect.

Children try to understand other people’s feelings – your child is developing the ability to share in the feelings of people they know, but (boys especially) won’t always say how they are feeling. They understand that death brings sadness to people.

Children can become upset about being different – some older children feel that what has happened is unfair. They may feel different from others around them – especially if they’ve lost a parent.



What makes things worse?

Witnessing a sudden death – is very frightening for your child who will need explanations and reassurance about what happened. Children will remember in detail what 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. It is very important that children understand what they have seen.

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. Children need to be reassured that there is nothing magical about death and that they are not to blame.

Uncontrolled emotion – children watch and listen closely to your reactions. If you are upset, they will probably become upset as well. They may be more affected than they seem if they sense strong anger, sadness, or worry in you or another family member.

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. They may not feel comfortable talking to friends or teachers about what happened. 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 in school and on the way home.

Children with special needs or circumstances

Children with special needs and circumstances react according to their levels of understanding and emotional support. With care and understanding, children can recover, but cope best with simple explanations of death and trauma, and encouragement to talk and ask questions. You may wish to refer to other guidelines which best reflect the level of understanding or behaviours of the individual 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

Children need to feel safe – both 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 school, or for other activities.
- Return to daily routines quickly.
- Avoid unnecessary separations – where separations are necessary they should be planned and predictable for your child.
- Give hugs and 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.

- Explain the meaning of death as early and immediately as possible, and be prepared to repeat this explanation when your child needs it.
- Use the families belief systems to explain death
- Use language 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. If your child cannot be reassured about taking part in



the funeral (or other ritual), encourage them to do something else 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).

Long term needs

Children need to understand – your child may only want to ask questions on things they are confused about (such as fairness). 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 confusing parts of what happened.
- 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.
- Reassure them that what they are feeling is normal and will get better with time.

- Let them know it is okay to have fun, hobbies, and pastimes.
- Help your children cope in simple ways (through art, storytelling, play).

Let other people know – teachers, trainers, 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. Sharing information about what happened can affect friendships, so involve your child in deciding what to tell people.

- Contact school authorities.
- Talk to adults in the neighbourhood or community who are important to your child.
- Be prepared for any questions they have.
- Talk to your child about what they want you to tell other people.

Get back into a routine – change and lack of routine upsets children. They feel safest when they know what to do and what to expect. Children like predictability in people, places, times, and activities, and benefit from sharing routines with you. 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 trigger unpleasant feelings or worries. Manage these reminders and triggers so that 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.

- Avoid too many reminders of what happened.
- Do something special for anniversaries, birthdays, and other occasions.
- Prepare for court cases, coroner's investigations, and public interest by talking to your child about what will happen. Give simple explanations about what to do and what they will see and hear.
- Be prepared for media interest in your family or in other cases that may remind your child of their own experience.

- 
- 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.

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.¹

- 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.

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 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 in school are as important as fun and play in helping your child cope and feel safe. Talking,

¹ see adult guidelines in this series

