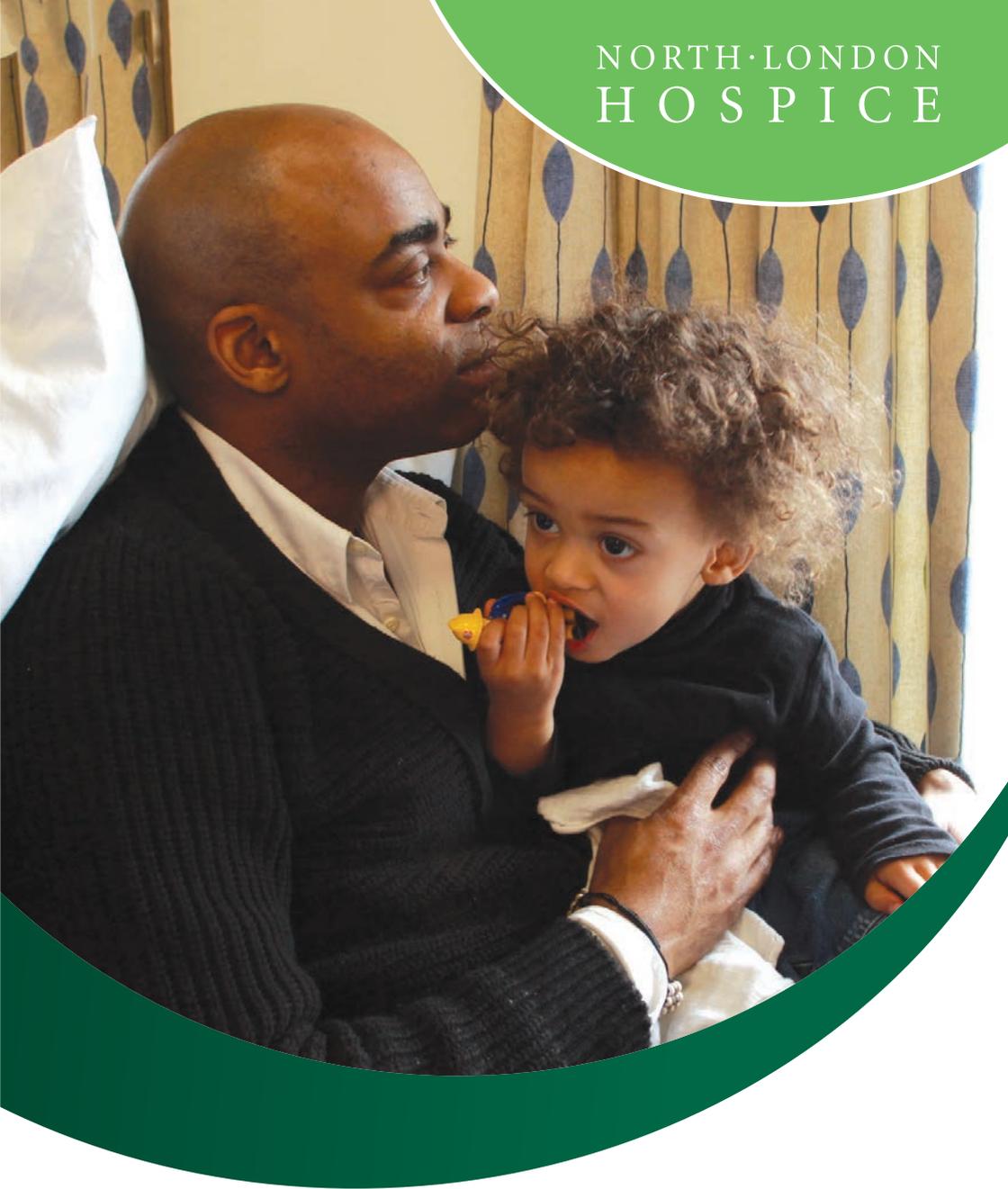


NORTH · LONDON
HOSPICE



Helping Bereaved Children

Helping Bereaved Children

Every child is emotionally affected when an important person in their life is no longer there. Adults, knowing how painful bereavement can be, or having difficulty in accepting the death themselves, often attempt to shield children from the pain by telling them little or nothing about what has happened. However young they are, children always sense something is wrong from the behaviour of those caring for them and from the changes that inevitably occur as a result of the death.

On their own, many children are not able to understand the reality of death and the feelings they are having. They may be confused and feel rejected or abandoned at a time when they most need comforting, understanding and security. Adults, struggling to cope with their own reactions to a death, may feel inadequate or totally helpless in dealing with grieving children.



How can you as a parent, teacher or friend help a grieving child?

- Allow them to share in making decisions about their role in attending the funeral and visiting the grave/crematorium – prepare them in advance for what they will see.
- Reassure them they are still loved and will be taken care of.
- Maintain as much stability, security and order in their lives as possible.
- Answer their questions honestly and in a way they can understand. You may have to do this repeatedly.
- Talk with them about the dead person when they want to.
- Be certain they are getting attention, love and care – they need time to be with their parents as well as with other caring adults.
- Encourage children to share their feelings with you and help them to understand and express them.
- Share grief with them. Allow them to comfort you when they want to. Don't hide your tears from them – they need to know crying is appropriate and acceptable.

Helping you to help bereaved children

Bereaved children need the attention, support and help of a sensitive, caring adult. North London Hospice social workers can help you and those closest to the children, to support them yourselves.

At times this support may need to come from someone other than a grieving parent. A family doctor, your child's school or one of our social workers can often help you find more specialist support.

The Hospice has a number of books and leaflets to help children and teenagers cope with grief and loss which may also be helpful.

If you feel it would be helpful to talk to someone from our service, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

Bereavement Support Service

Telephone: 020 8343 8841

Email: nlh@northlondonhospice.co.uk

Children frequently show their grief in ways which adults do not expect. They may express themselves by having symptoms in their bodies rather than being able to talk about their feelings. They tend to grieve in spurts and go through periods of time seemingly unaffected.

How do children show grief?

Children and young people of any age may respond with the following reactions:

Denial – a way of coping with something not understood or accepted. They may have fantasies about the dead person, talk about them in the present tense or continue asking for the person, despite being told he or she is never coming back.

Guilt – may be the result of needing to find a reason for the death. Some children feel responsible for a death or feel guilty for being alive. Sometimes the behaviour of other family members causes children to feel guilty.

Anger – may be directed at friends who have not had a loss, at the dead person for dying, at surviving parents, brothers or sisters, or others.

Panic – children may fear losing more people close to them or that they themselves may die. They may feel insecure and worry about who will take care of them.

Idealisation – they may idealise the dead person and begin to imitate his or her mannerisms.

Physical complaints – they may lose their appetite, have nightmares, seem to be tired much of the time or complain of upset stomachs or headaches. Some children may complain of having the same symptoms shown by the dead person during the final illness.

These are all common ways children can show their feelings.



'Without
your assistance
I could not have
coped on
my own'

At certain ages there may be particular responses:

Under the age of about 5-7 children see death as temporary. Their first response may be feelings of abandonment, fear and insecurity. They may express these feelings by asking repeated questions about the missing person. They may be angry with the dead person for leaving them, or at the surviving parent for being unable to respond to them. Other responses may include wetting, clinging, having tantrums, being aggressive, withdrawing, becoming attached to something belonging to the dead person or to another person of the same sex as the person who has died.

From about 5-8 children very often associate death with anger and aggression. They tend to have fantasies about it and may ask many questions. Frequently adults find the questions inappropriate or upsetting. Children in this age group are unable to understand or deal with their feelings on their own.

From the age of 8-9 years children usually respond to the death of someone close to them by crying, denying what has happened, becoming aggressive, hostile or apathetic. They will want to know what has happened to the dead person and will ask questions to satisfy their curiosity. The understanding of death in this age group is usually quite realistic.

If you have any suggestions

We are always trying to improve our service to patients, their families and carers and we welcome feedback, both good and bad. If you have any comments about our Bereavement Service please let your Hospice contact know or contact Deborah Mosdall, Feedback Lead.

Tel: 020 8343 8841 or email
nlh@northlondonhospice.co.uk

Or write to

Pam McClinton, CEO,
North London Hospice,
47 Woodside Avenue,
London N12 8TT

If you would like a copy of our Statement of Purpose that gives a full explanation of the services we offer, it is available on request.

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Serving the Boroughs of Barnet, Enfield & Haringey