

Children in Scotland Conference 2025: Supporting grieving children and young people

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Child Bereavement UK helps children, parents and families to rebuild their lives when a child grieves or when a child dies. We support children and young people up to the age of 25 who are facing bereavement, and anyone affected by the death of a child of any age.

We provide training to professionals in health and social care, education, and the voluntary and corporate sectors, equipping them to provide the best possible care to bereaved families.

Call our Helpline
0800 02 888 40

childbereavementuk.org

Outcomes:



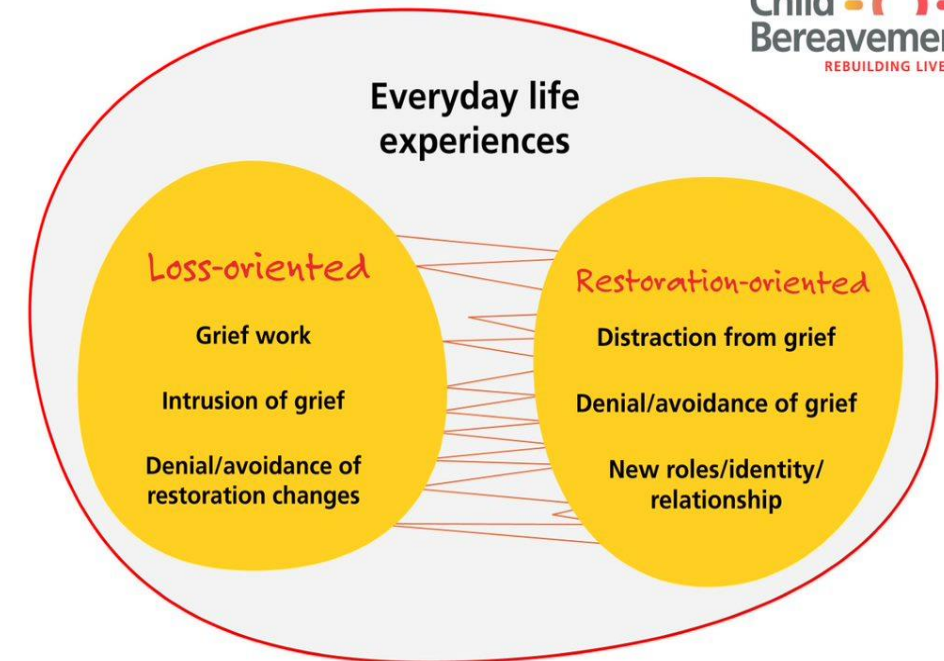
- Increase awareness of how children and young people understand and respond to loss, death and bereavement across the age range
- Gain an understanding of the theories of grief in relation to children and young people
- Understand how to communicate with and support bereaved children and young people
- Consider the potential impact on you as professionals when coming alongside bereaved children and young people
- Gain information about Child Bereavement UK, other support organisations and resources that can support bereaved families

Some statistics for context

- Every year, **46,300** children are bereaved of a **parent** in the UK
- That's about **127 children every day**, bereaved of a parent
- Around **1 in 29** children have been bereaved: equivalent to one in every class
- At least **30 children** every day are bereaved **suddenly** (RTC, accident, illness, suicide)
- **Many more** children and young people will be bereaved every day of a sibling, a friend, a grandparent or other family member
- **78%** of children and young people report a 'significant' bereavement
- By 16, **20% of 16 year-olds** will have had one or both parents die

How children and young people grieve

How children grieve

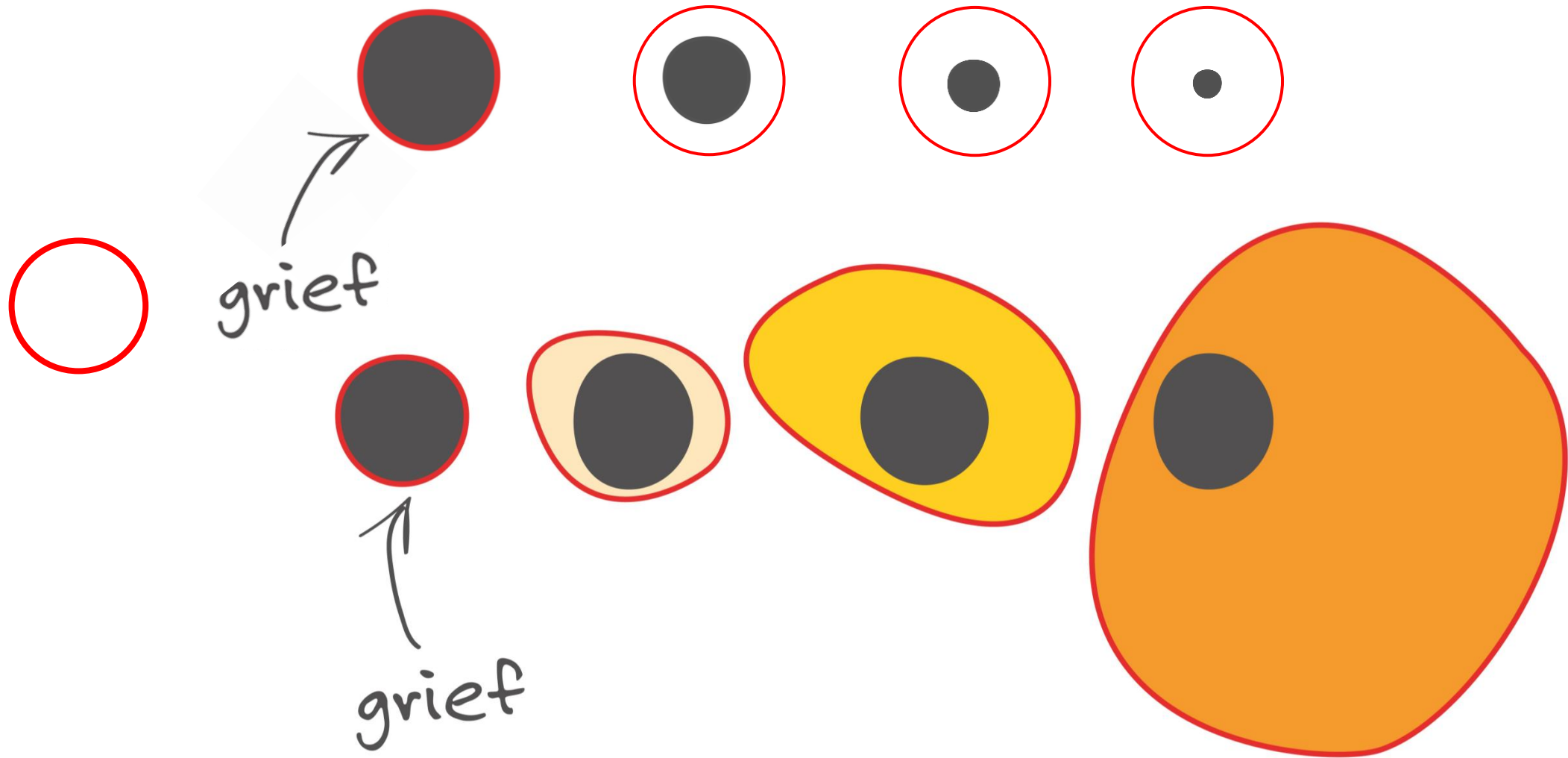


Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (1999)

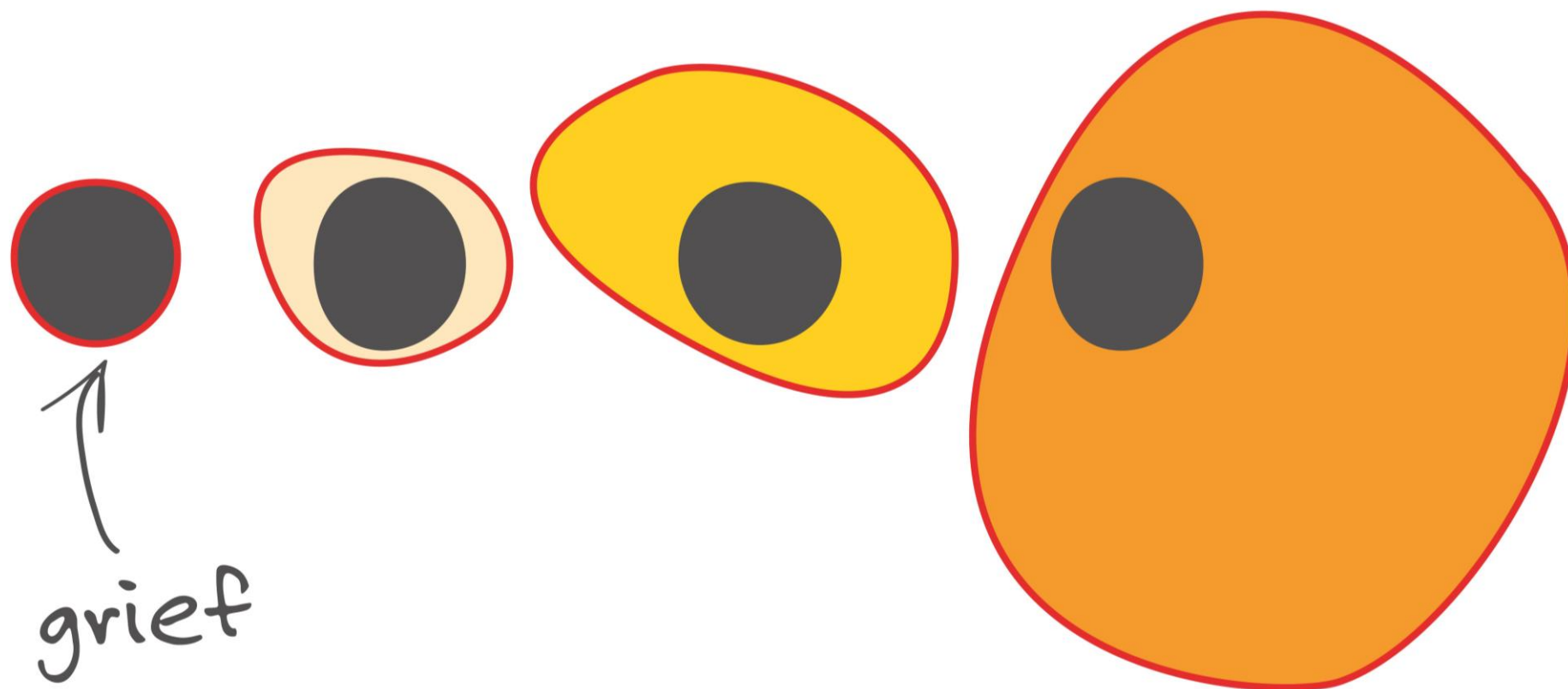
The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description, Death Studies 23:3 197-224

In children we call this 'Puddle jumping'

Growing around grief



Growing around grief



Continuing Bonds

- It is natural to maintain a connection with the person who died – maybe for your whole life
- These relationships are not static; they change as we change
- Continuing connection helps resilience and sense of self
- However, not all relationships are positive and should be continued

Klass, Silverman, and Nickman: Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief, 1996.

Meaning-making

- The meaning(s) that the bereaved person gives to what has happened
- The ways in which the person begins to make sense of the loss
- The role of cultural practices, spiritual traditions, personal beliefs, world view
- The meaning the person has of and gives to their own sense of self
- The meaning that the bereaved person can find in the future

Niemeyer, Prigerson and Davies: Mourning and Meaning, 2002

Children and young people's understanding of death

Children's developing concept of death

The 'concepts' that a child develops around death... *'from hamster to own death/suicide'*

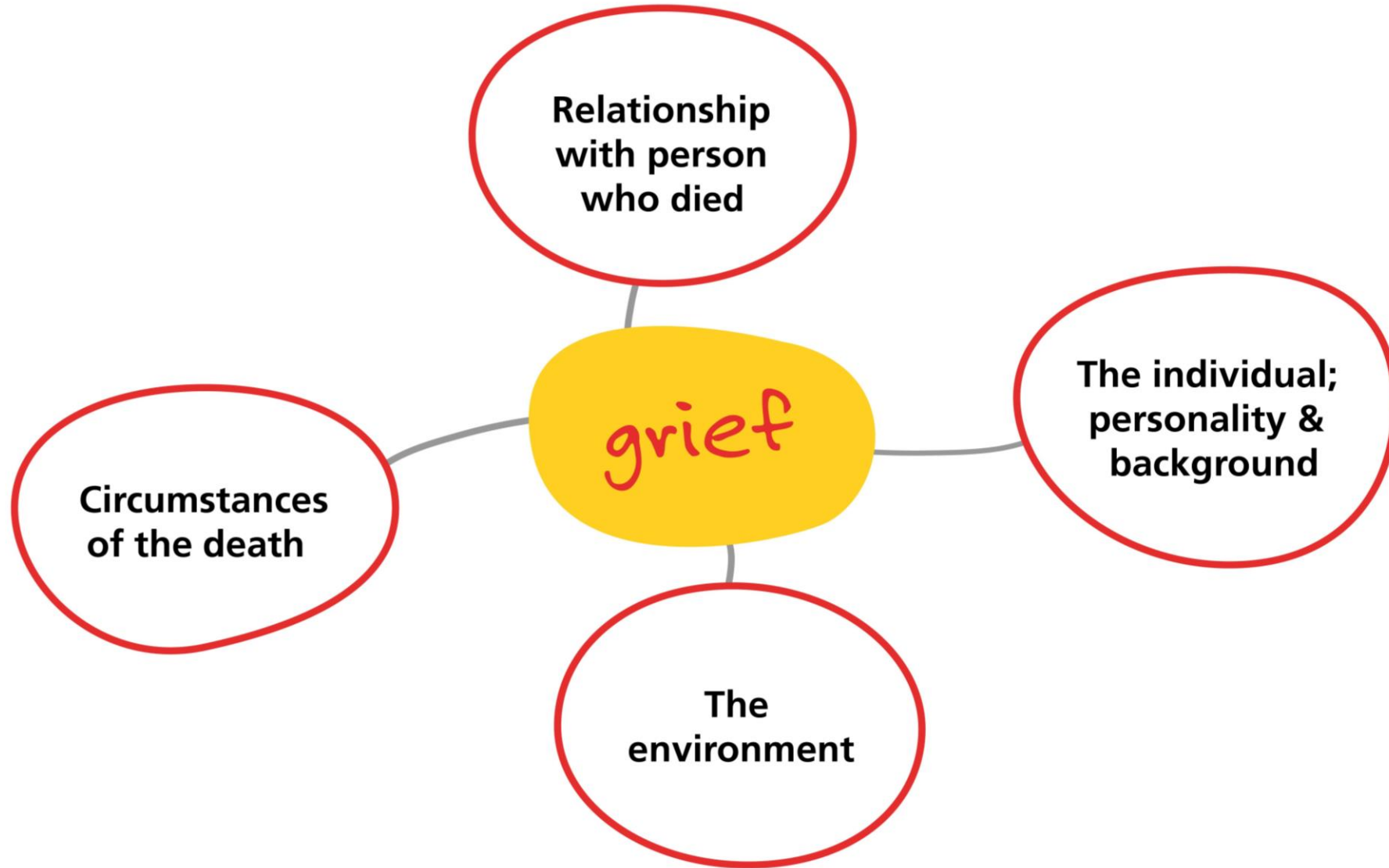
- Universality (*every living thing dies*)
- Certainty (*every living thing will die*)
- Unpredictability (*you don't know exactly when you will die*)
- Irreversibility (*when you die, you can't become alive again*)
- Permanence (*when you die, you stay dead forever*)
- Function (*when you die, you can't do the things you could do when alive*)



Childrens understanding of death

Age	Conceptual understanding	Feelings/behaviour
Up to 6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal of familiar person • Emotional withdrawal of main carer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abandonment; insecurity; crying in protest • Disrupted sleep and feeding patterns
6 months – 2 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing 'object constancy awareness' • Can 'miss' someone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation anxiety, searching behaviour • Withdrawal
2 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interested in death, but no sense of its permanence or irreversibility • Concrete thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectation of return/clingy • Constant questions • Regression
5 – 8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fuller understanding of death • Magical thinking • Developing 'conscience' so can feel guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear the death of others • Often extremes of good/bad behaviour • Egocentric
8 – 12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands permanence, universality and consequences of death • May develop fear of own mortality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety about own health/death • Preoccupied at school • Possibility of social withdrawal
12+ years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puberty – time of great change • Understands impact of death on their life • Emotional maturity may not equate to physical development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly held views; reluctant to ask for help • Challenge own beliefs and those of others • Question their own mortality • May take grief outside the family

Factors affecting the grieving process



Children's understanding of death

A child's understanding of and reaction to a situation is affected by:

- Their developmental stage of understanding and any educational needs
- What they have been told by the adults around them
- What they have overheard other people talking about
- Their relationship to the person who is ill or has died
- What impact it has on their daily life.



Providing information to children can:

- Address their concerns
- Enhance positive co-operation
- Reduce anxiety, fears and fantasies
- Lighten the burden of secrecy
- Reduce tension in families (and schools)

Beale et al., 2003

Discussion:

Alex is 5 and lives with his parents and 16-year-old sister, Ellen.

Recently, Alex's grandma died. He was told that she has gone to a better place and hopes that they can all go to be with her in that better place soon. His mum mentioned going on holiday in half term, and he imagines that this is when they will go.

He overheard his dad on the phone saying they had, "lost" grandma, but he is hopeful they will find her in the better place.

- **How could Alex be supported in understanding what has happened to grandma?**
- **Who would be able to help Alex understand?**

Supporting grieving children and young people

“ We in the Western world live with a paradox: death is all around us, yet we believe that if we do not talk with children about death, it will not touch them. ”

Silverman 2000



How to confuse children

- We've lost your father
- Granny passed away in her sleep
- Your brother's crossed over
- Mum's gone to Heaven
- They've gone to a better place
- Your Mum is a star
- Your Uncle turned up his toes / popped his clogs / bought the farm / kicked the bucket / is pushing up the daisies
- Even terms like 'heart attack' and 'stroke' are confusing



Talking to children

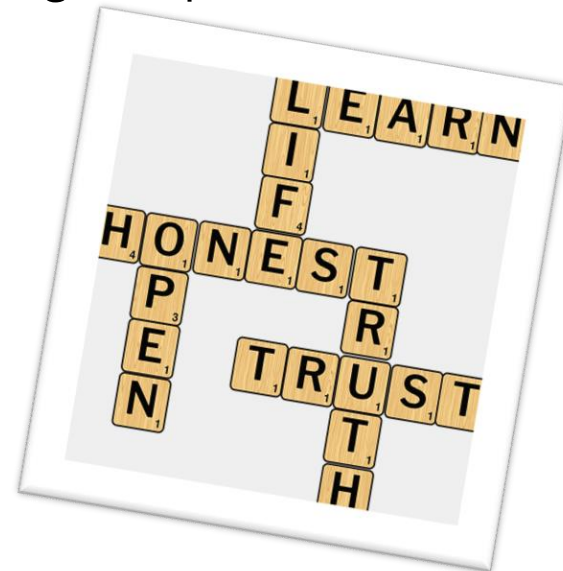
Some principles:

- Simple, straightforward language
- Age-appropriate information
- Check their understanding at each stage
- The what, where, when – as directly as possible
- The how – simply, factually (if appropriate)
- The why – might be harder/impossible or until older
- Answer questions if possible and appropriate
- If appropriate, ask family members for guidance (but not necessarily control)
- Offer to find out answers at a later date if unable to answer or inappropriate now – and then follow through



When someone has died: children tell us what helps

- People acknowledging what has happened and is happening and the impact
- Clear, simple language & age-appropriate explanations of what has happened, is happening and what will happen
- Questions answered – if possible | The truth – if possible. Returning to questions when more is known
- Supportive adults to share the journey
- Open family communication / Being involved and included
- Opportunities to safely express feelings and thoughts
- Opportunities to remember and being included in memorials
- ‘Permission’ to grieve now and in future
- Support through transitions



Help to safely express feelings and thoughts

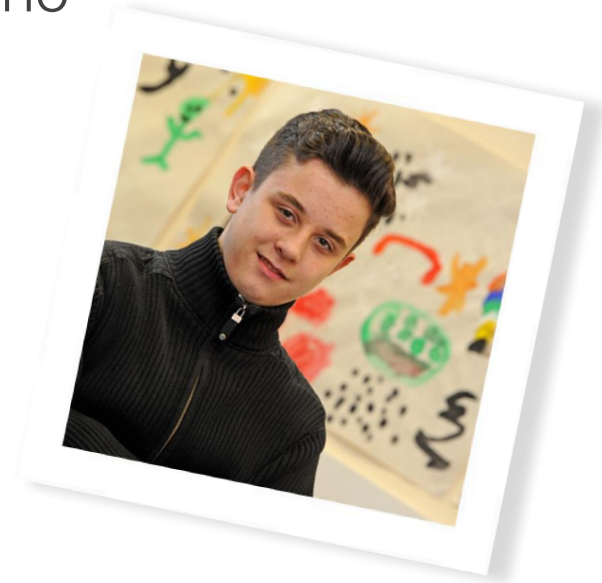
- Acknowledging the range of feelings that come with grief: help with language
- Support to safely express anger, rage, fury – 'fizzy feelings'
- 'Side-along' opportunities to talk; 'curious'/'wonder' questions
- Being able to access a safe 'quiet space' if feeling overwhelmed
- Having a comfort object/memento / or a 'link' or 'splink' / 'Large and Small'
- Activities that build their self-esteem and resilience
- Access to appropriate story books, films, resources, and support to notice the feelings
- Reassurance that it is OK to grieve and also to have fun





Help to remember and being included in memorials

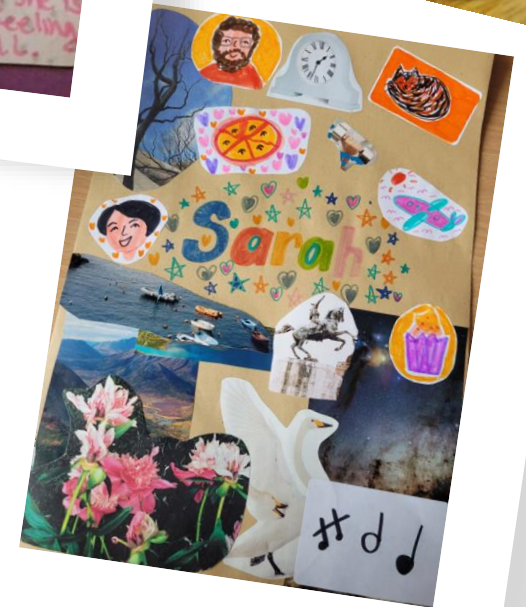
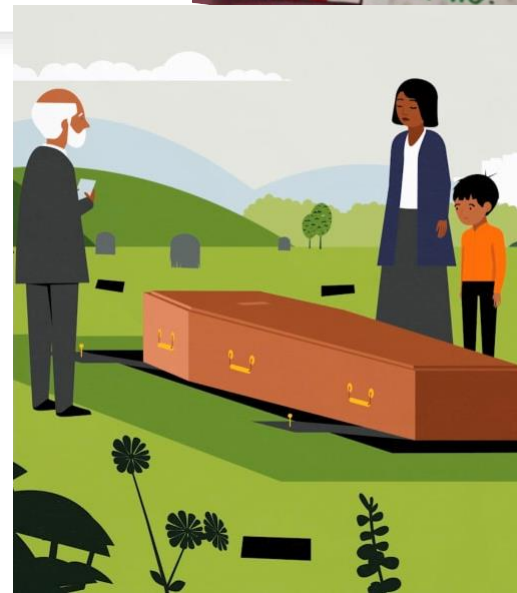
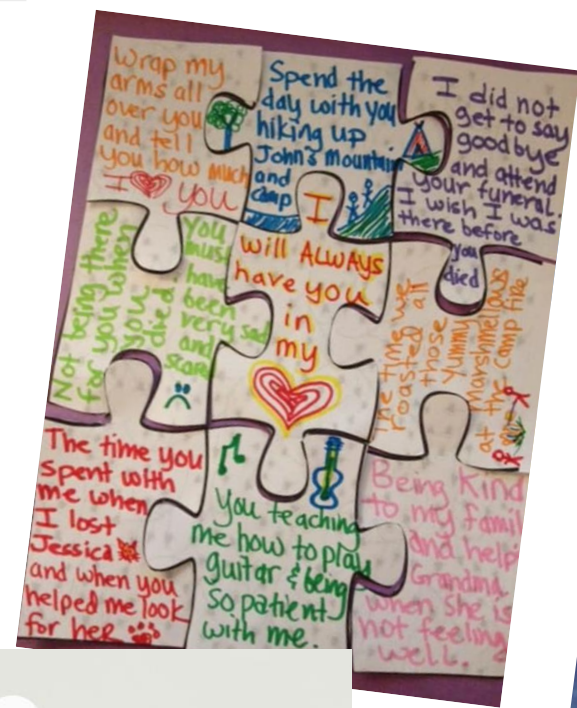
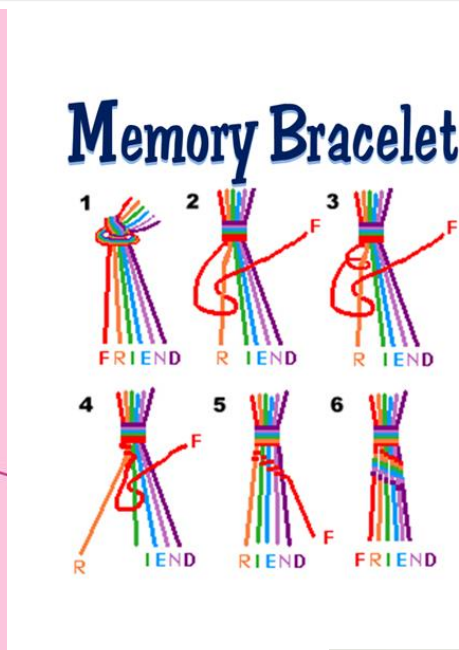
- Opportunities to talk about/ask about/learn about the person who has died
- Support to participate in their chosen way in funerals/memorial events
- Life 'quizzes'; postcards to family and friends
- Activities around memories – memory boxes, memory stones, memory jars
- Opportunities to create new family memories
- People being aware of, and planning ahead for, events such as Mother's / Father's Day, birthdays, holidays. Keeping a Calendar of significant dates





and isn't it just so pretty to think, all along there was some invisible string tying you to me?

invisible string (taylor's version)



The importance of parenting

Research evidence demonstrates that a (surviving) parent's ability to parent the bereaved child and the child's self-esteem are highly significant in how the child manages bereavement.

Bereavement support should aim to increase the capacity of family, friends and communities to support and enhance children's potential for resilience.

What can help build resilience

Help them to feel **safe** and **secure**

Familiar routines (when possible) (or introducing them, if they were never there), and continuing with familiar activities where appropriate

Help them to feel **connected** and socially supported

Try to provide opportunities for connection (with people they know and trust) in unthreatening circumstances; encourage talking (openly if possible, tangentially if not) about feelings and thoughts; think of alternative ways of connection & communicating about how they are feeling

Help them to feel **calm**

Reassurance that reactions are understandable, not unnatural. Help to regain control of feelings and reactions; breathing exercises (5 Fingers, 4 sides etc); Fizzy Feelings; 'Safe spaces'; Lock boxes

Help them to feel as if they have some **control**

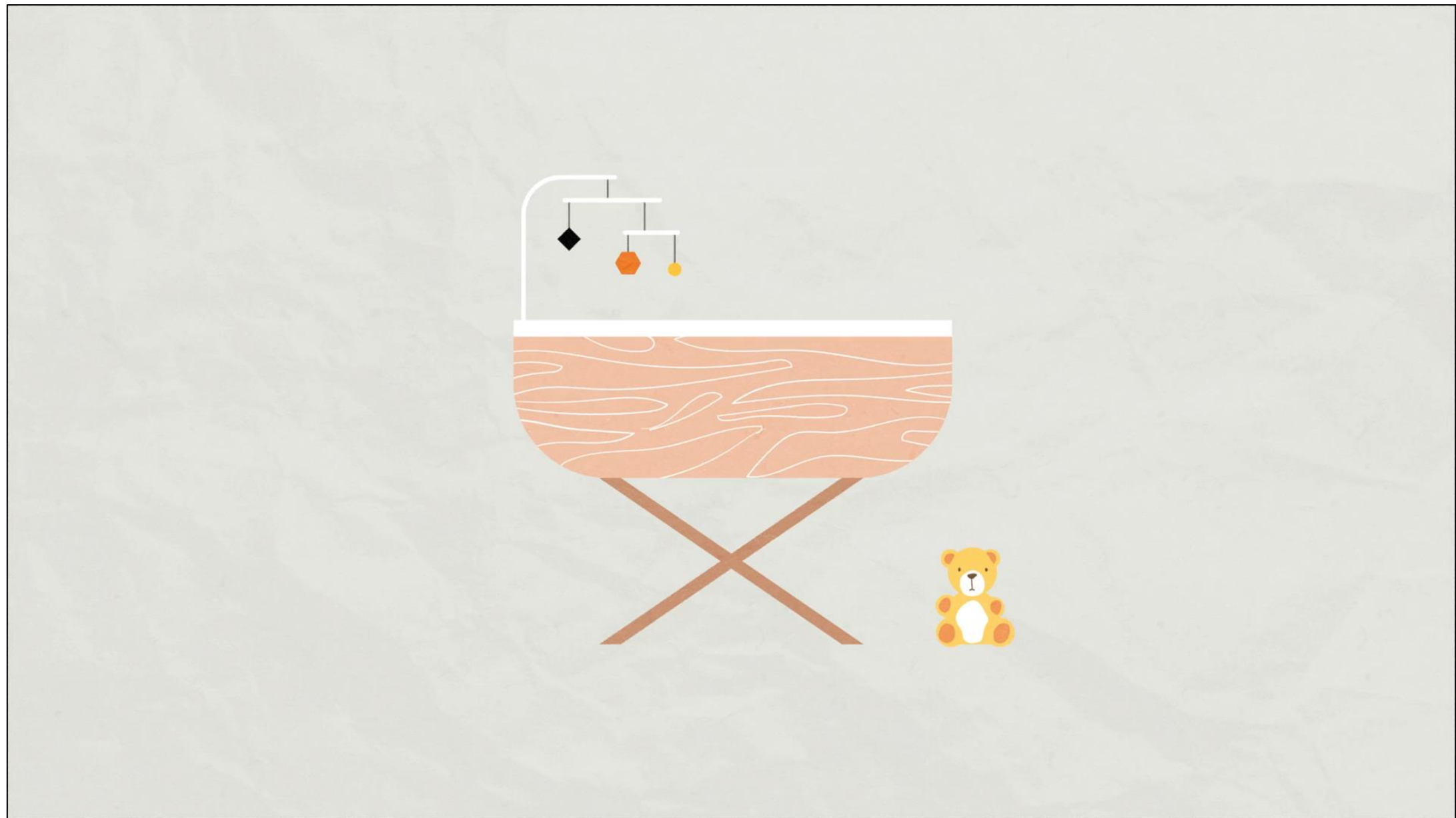
Life will feel unpredictable and out of their control. Where can they have choices? Where make decisions? Where can they exercise control? How can you create these opportunities?

The impact of this work on us

“ The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily, and not be touched by it, is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet ”

Remen, 1996

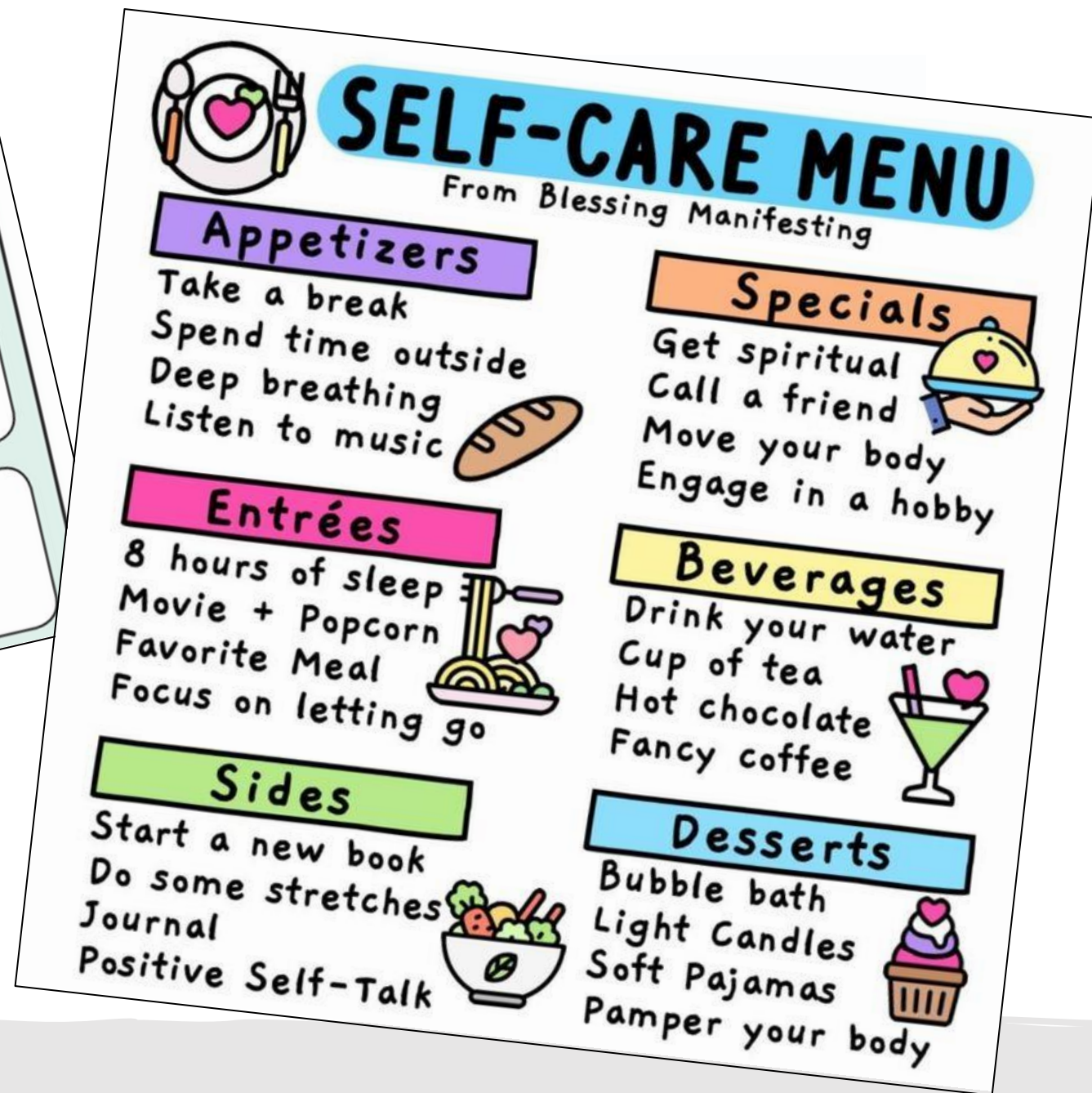
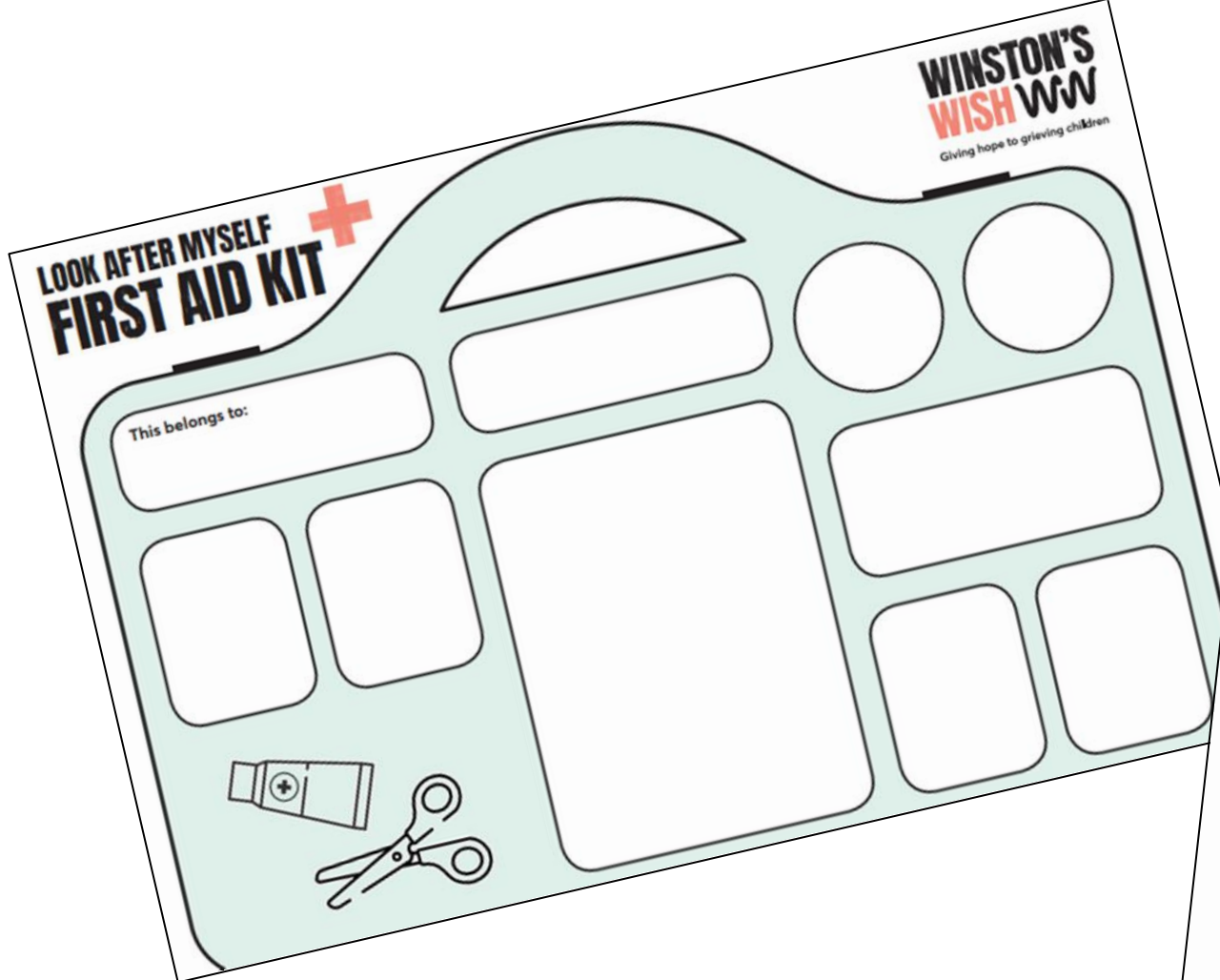


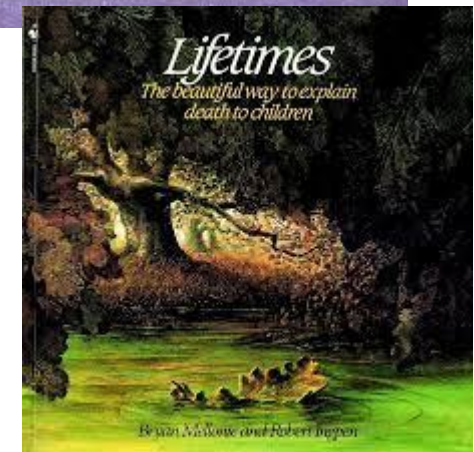
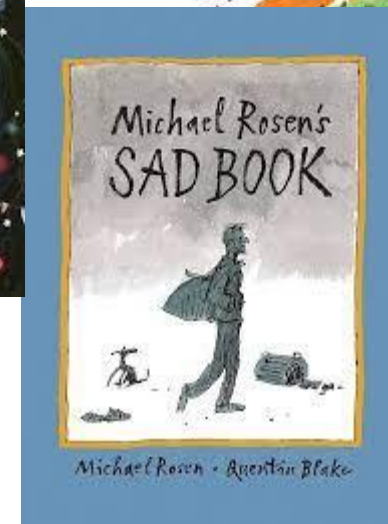
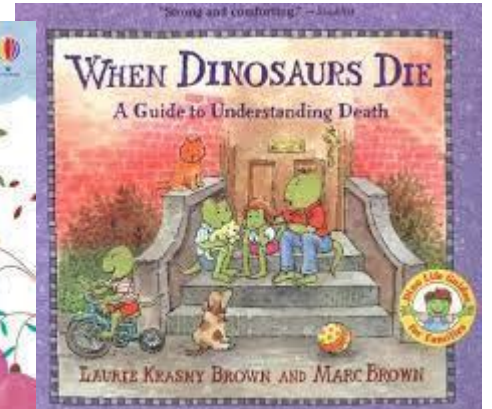
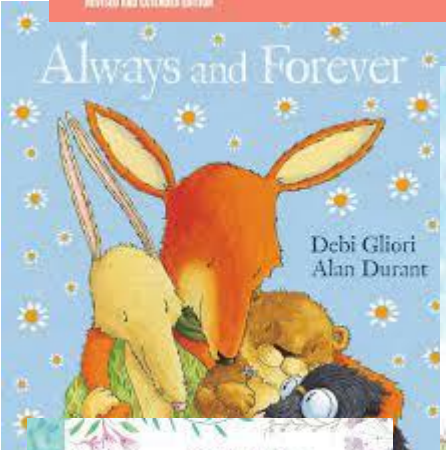
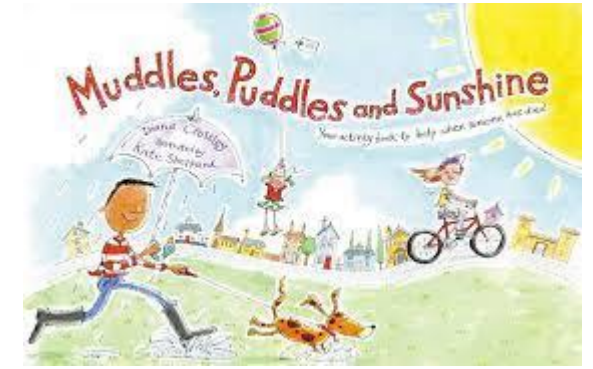
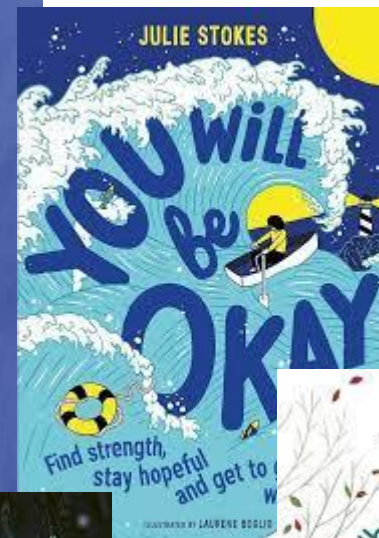
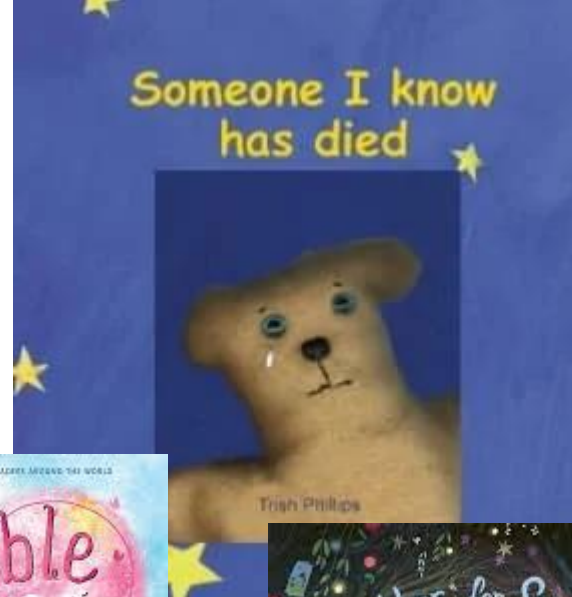


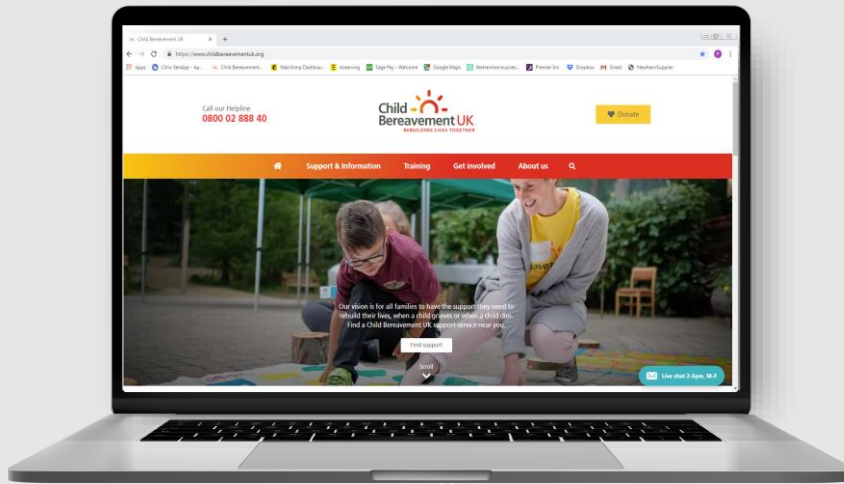
Survival Factors

- Being proactive – not waiting for the ‘crash’
- Self-awareness and understanding of our own emotions
- Somewhere safe to express feelings
- Access to regular support and supervision
- Being part of a supportive team
- Reflective practice
- Clarity about the boundaries of your role
- Prioritising self-care
- Life outside work!









childbereavementuk.org



Our helpline team provides confidential support, information and guidance to families and professionals.

We're here to respond to calls, emails, and Live Chat via our website
9am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday.

Call our Helpline **0800 02 888 40**

Email helpline@childbereavementuk.org

childbereavementuk.org

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Thank you