**Kilbryde Hospice – Sunflower Service**

**Guidance on telling a child someone close to them is dying or has died**

Telling a child that someone is dying or has died may be the hardest thing you ever do and often one of the first questions is ‘how much should I tell them?’ It’s normal to worry about making things worse by saying too much or the wrong thing but remember, the worst has already happened. Our Sunflower Service team at Kilbryde Hospice are on hand to help guide you through and suggest some gentle and caring ways in which to approach telling a child that someone they love or are close to is dying or has died.

Often adults want to protect children from death and it’s normal to think that children need to be shielded. However, in reality, children are very aware and will pick up when something as enormous as a death has occurred.

**Use clear language when telling a child someone is dying or has died:**

It is better to use clear and direct language with children. Use the words ‘dying’, ‘died’ and ‘dead’ rather than ‘passed away’ or ‘lost’ when telling them. These terms can lead to confusion, especially in younger children who may wonder if they can go and find a person who is now ‘lost’.

From our experience, it is better to be open, honest and direct when a loved one has died. In the absence of clear information children tend to ‘fill in the gaps’ to try and make sense of what is happening. This can mean that children imagine all sorts of things about a death, which are often worse than the reality.

**Build up information like a jigsaw when explaining:**

You don’t need to give children all the information in one go. When telling a child someone is dying or has died it’s best to give them information in smaller chunks that are more manageable and build it up like a jigsaw.

For example, very young children start to build puzzles with just a few blocks and for them ‘Mummy has died’ and ‘it’s really sad’ might be enough to begin with. As they develop and get older children will require more information to make sense of the puzzle. For example, you might explain how a person has died and could say ‘Mummy’s heart stopped working which meant her body became broken’.

**Let them ask questions about what is happening or what has happened:**

If children are older, it is also important to ask them how much information they would like to receive, for example, ‘would you like to know what happened at the hospice/hospital?’

Letting children know they can ask more questions in the future is also important, this tells them that they can rely on the adults around them to provide the truth at a confusing time. Even if you do not know the answers immediately you can reassure children and let them know you’ll try to find out.

**Ways to explain to a child that someone is dying or has died:**

Some suggested words/phrases:

*“We know that all living things will die someday. Flowers, animals, trees, butterflies, people all die eventually…”*

*“… however, the great majority of people will die when they are very old.”*

*“Occasionally, someone will die before they are old because, for example, of an accident or serious illness.”*

*“When someone dies, their body stops working and they are no longer able to do the things they could when they were alive, such as move or talk or hug or play.”*

*“Sadly, [name] has died. Everyone wishes they had not died and had lived for many more years. However, their body was not able to keep working and so they died. Their heart stopped beating, their lungs stopped breathing and their brain stopped thinking, and so they died.”*

*“We are very healthy and we’re going to do all we can to keep that way, because I want to be around to (play with my great grandchildren/travel to the Moon/celebrate the year 2100).”*

**Further information and support:**

**Kilbryde Hospice Sunflower Service:** Advice and signposting service for parents, general bereavement support for children of Kilbryde Hospice patients including talking, arts and crafts (e.g. memory boxes or jars) and music therapy.

We also keep a small stock of free books for children and young people on bereavement.

Please see a member of staff to arrange an assessment or referral or:

Phone 01355 20 20 20

Email: anna.ludwig@kilbrydehospice.org.uk

Visit our website at www.kilbrydehospice.org.uk

**Winston’s Wish:** Much of the information in this leaflet has been adapted from material on the Winston’s Wish website (www.winstonswish.org). At this site you will also find general information on children’s reactions to death and dying and how they may explore their emotions.

**Child Bereavement UK:** A wealth of information can be found at www.childbereavementuk.org with guidance on talking about death and dying and how children may experience bereavement.

