

Coping with bereavement during COVID-19

Supporting your child with additional needs

Introduction

Everyone experiences bereavement and loss sometime in their life. This is just the same for children with autism. Having additional needs does not mean that a child cannot be affected by grief, or learn to cope with bereavement.

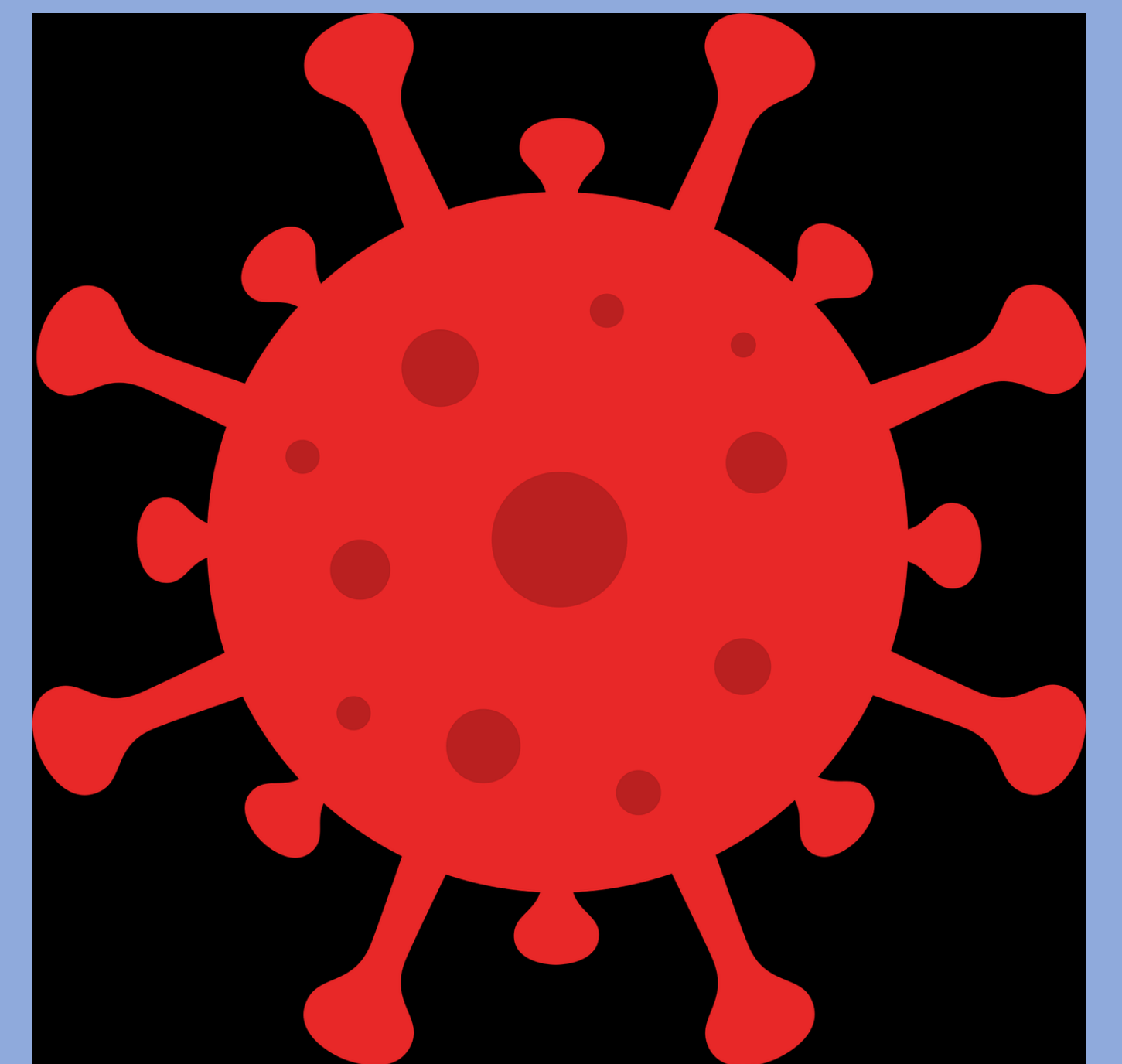
However, having autism or other additional needs might mean a child needs extra support to understand death, and might need different activities to help them understand and cope with feelings of grief.

Remember that the loss of a pet or something else important in their life might affect a child with autism and additional needs just as much as the loss of a person.

Impact of Coronavirus

Understanding and coping with death can be hard at any time, but the coronavirus pandemic might make it even more difficult.

Some children may know people who have become ill and died from coronavirus. Others may have family members or friends who have died for other reasons, but the pandemic may have prevented them from participating in rituals associated with death.



Other ways coronavirus may impact on children's experience of bereavement:

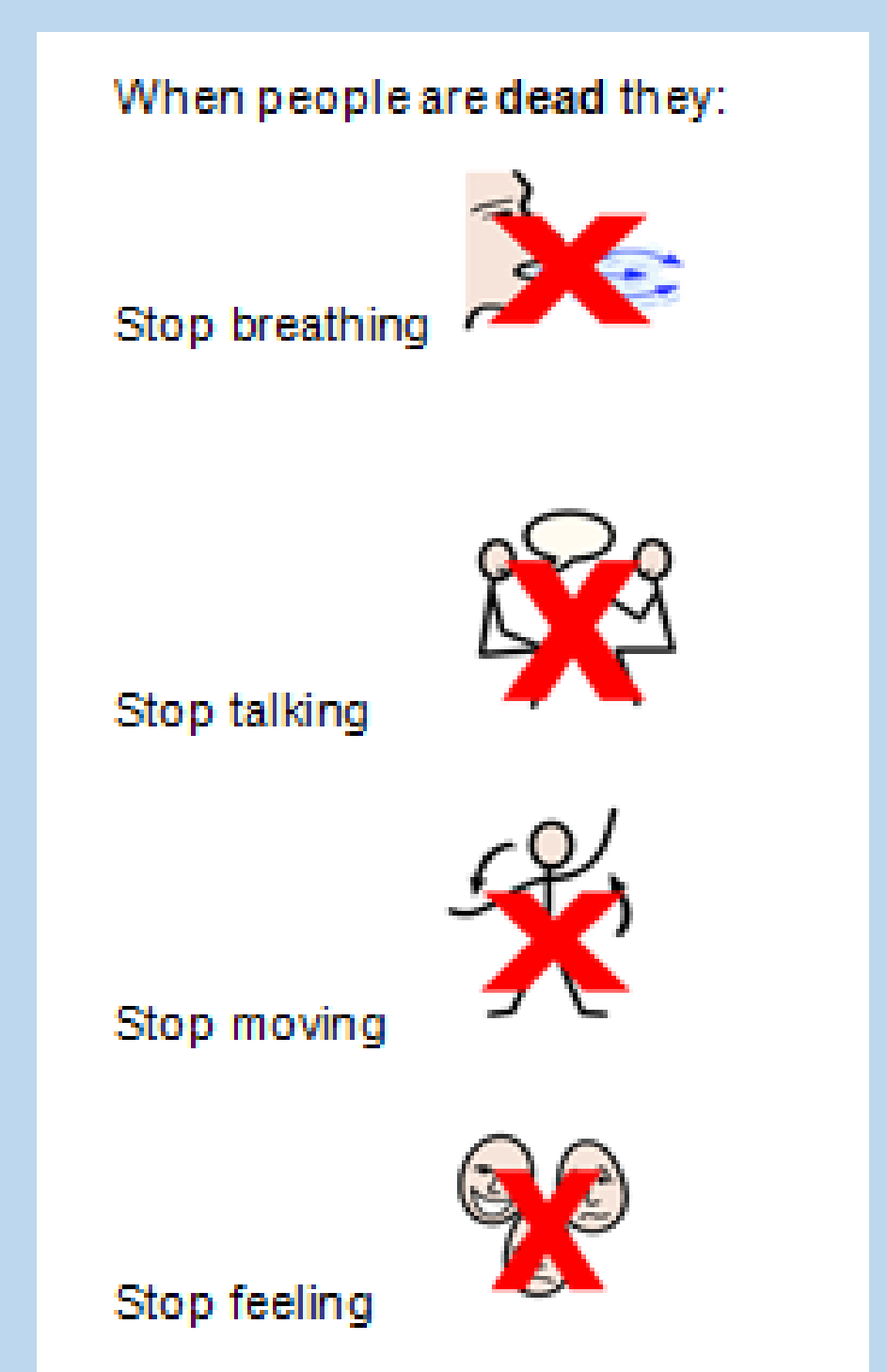
- **Unpredictability:** People may become ill and die quickly. This will give children with autism and additional needs little time to adjust.
- **Distance:** Children may not have been able to spend time with the person when they were ill. This might make it more difficult to understand that they were ill, and they may have more questions. Children may also have had limited opportunities to say "goodbye" and may not have been able to attend funerals.
- **Constant reminders:** It is hard to avoid hearing news and stories about other people being affected by Coronavirus.

Coping with bereavement during COVID-19 Supporting your child with additional needs

Explaining death to a child with autism or additional needs

Children will need different amounts of information depending on their communication skills. Try to explain things to your child based on their level of understanding and preferred way of communicating.

- Make **time and space** to talk. Listen out for signs that your child might want to talk. Use your child's questions to guide your conversations.
- Use **simple straightforward explanations** such as 'their body became worn out and stopped working'.
- **Avoid using metaphors** like 'grandad didn't wake up', 'they have gone to sleep' or 'we've lost Auntie Sue' because they can be taken literally.
- Sometimes it helps to explain death as part of the life cycle, e.g. using plants or animals.
- If your child does not want to talk about their feelings, try not to worry. Some children might like to **write or draw** instead, others may not be ready or might not need to!
- **Talk about how the loss has made you feel.** This lets your child know that their feelings are normal and it is OK to talk about them.
- **Social Stories** can be useful to explain things like what death means and what happens at a funeral.



Questions about death



Be prepared for your child to ask lots of questions about death. Sometimes questions might seem to come from nowhere, or children may ask questions about something that happened a long time ago.

Questions may be very 'matter of fact'. Try to answer as honestly as you can.

Your child may ask the same questions over and over again. Repeat explanations and gently check their understanding by asking them questions about what you have said.

Asking lots of questions does not mean they are obsessed by death. Often it is a child's way of making sense of what has happened. Sometimes it also provides reassurance and comfort.

Coping with bereavement during COVID-19

Supporting your child with additional needs

Behaviour and bereavement

Remember your child might not express their feelings about a bereavement in the same way as other children.

Your child might find it hard to express how they are feeling in words. They might not appear to be sad (e.g. crying). Try to remember that any change in their behaviour can show that they are finding things difficult.

Children might:

- Want to spend more time by themselves or become more “clingy”
- **Not want to do activities** they previously enjoyed
- Be more **irritable** or easily **frustrated**
- Have aches and pains, or feel **tired**
- **Sleep** more or less
- **Eat** more or less
- Return to behaviours of a younger child e.g. in toileting or speaking
- Move through different emotions and reactions quickly.

All of these behaviours are **normal reactions** to bereavement and should improve over time, as a child makes sense of their loss and comes to terms with it.

Look after yourself

You might feel like you have to put your own feelings aside to support your child. However, looking after yourself will help you to be there for your child even more.

- Take time to look after yourself and find someone you can talk to if that's what you need.
- Think about what has helped with your emotional wellbeing when you have faced similar situations before
- Be kind to yourself. Doing the best you can at this really difficult time is all anyone can ask of you.



Coping with bereavement during COVID-19

Supporting your child with additional needs

Remembering the person who has died

- Your child might like to make a **memory book or box** to remind them of the person who has died. A happy memories jar could be used to remind your child of happy things when they are feeling sad.
- Your child might like to keep a **piece of clothing or object** they associate with the loved one to touch, hold or smell.
- Perhaps your child and their loved one had a **favourite activity** that they liked to do together that you could do with your child.
- Your family may wish to have your **own memorial service** which your child could be involved in organising or take part in.



Not all children will want to join in with these activities. Different children will need different things at different times. It's fine to follow their lead.

Saying "goodbye" when a funeral is not possible

If your child is unable to attend a funeral, there are still ways of involving them in a meaningful way. For example:

- It might be possible to watch a **live stream** of the funeral online from home
- The child could be supported to follow the **order of service or join in a funeral ritual** from home.
- Keeping your child informed about what will happen. You may wish to **show your child photos to show them what will happen at the funeral**, e.g. pictures of the crematorium, the coffin, flowers or decorations.
- Your child may wish to **write down some memories, draw a picture or choose a meaningful object** which could be taken to the funeral by another family member.

Check the Government website for the latest guidelines about attending funerals.

Coping with bereavement during COVID-19 *Supporting your child with additional needs*

Bereavement support and information

Winston's Wish

Winston's Wish supports bereaved children and their families.

Website: www.winstonswish.org/

National Freephone Helpline: 08088 020 021 (Open 9am – 5pm, Monday – Friday)

Child Bereavement UK

Supports families when a baby or child of any age dies or is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement.

Website: www.childbereavementuk.org/

Helpline: 0800 0288 840 (Open 9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday)

Cruse Bereavement Care

Provides support, advice and information to anyone affected by bereavement.

Website: www.cruse.org.uk/

Helpline: 0808 808 1677 (Monday and Friday 09:30am – 5pm, Tuesday to Thursday 09:30am to 8pm)

Other useful sources of information

Sheffield Children's Hospital COVID-19 resources:

<https://www.sheffieldchildrens.nhs.uk/patients-and-parents/coronavirus-resources-for-children-and-families/>

National Autistic Society – guidance and helpline for parents, young people and staff:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/helpful-resources.aspx>