

OpenLearn Mini Lecture

Supporting bereaved neurodivergent children

Professor Erica Borgstrom and Dr Jon Rainford:

ERICA BORGSTROM Did you know that neurodivergent children may experience death and loss differently from others around them? There are a lot of social and cultural norms about grief and expectations about how someone should feel and behave after someone has died.

JON RAINFORD Research demonstrates that neurodivergent adults' grief can be minimised by others: they assume neurodivergent people lack the capacity to grieve or that their behaviour is inappropriate. This can lead to social isolation and cause neurodivergent individuals to feel pressured to conform.

Neurodivergent young people can experience the world in different, often more intense ways.

Their grief reactions and meaning-making may vary from what their peers and adults – such as teachers and parents – expect and experience themselves when grieving. Worried about possible questions, fitting in with social etiquette, or a roller-coaster of emotions, adults may be tempted to shield neurodivergent children from death and not involve them in events like funerals.

ERICA BORGSTROM Collaborating with death educators, Dead Good, who work with neurodivergent children and their families, we offer three tips on how to support bereaved or grieving neurodivergent children and young people:

JON RAINFORD Tip 1: Encourage and support them to be involved **on their terms** – help them participate in rites, customs, or farewell ceremonies in ways that are meaningful to them and recognise their connection to the dead person or pet. This can include using clear language about death and dying, rather than euphemisms, and co-creating a ritual.

ERICA BORGSTROM Tip 2: **Anticipate and minimise** sensory overwhelm – funerals and memorials can include triggers for neurodivergent children, which can make them feel overwhelmed. Prepare or adjust for different clothing, food, noise, music, and smells. You can bring suitable snacks and supports. Consider the potential unusual social cues, sights or unfamiliar practices. Will there be crowds, strangers, or a possibility of sensing other people's big emotions? It can be helpful to provide clear information beforehand about what to expect and the possibilities for regulation.

JON RAINFORD Tip 3: Offer **multiple ways** to understand loss or express feelings: we don't need to force verbal sharing or direct interaction. Adults can provide materials and options, presenting them without shame or judgment about how or when the children are feeling or expressing their grief. Art, movement, music, role-play, writing, nature, toys or special rituals can all provide ways to grieve and connect. And can be useful at **any point** before or after a death.

ERICA BORGSTROM The cliche is that death is universal because we all eventually die. But how people grieve is actually incredibly diverse. Traditions and social norms are continuously being reimagined and remade. Involving and supporting bereaved neurodiverse children in ways that value them recognises this diversity and can foster their emotional safety and resilience now and in the long term.