

The Benefits of Keepsake and Memory Boxes in Continuing Bonds

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Context

“HER ABSENCE IS LIKE THE SKY, SPREAD OVER EVERYTHING”
C.S.LEWIS

The Child and Families Service offer resources to families pre (keepsake) and post (memory) bereavement and we support patients who want to leave a legacy to the children in their life and empower them to achieve this. We also support children and young people to work on these resources to allow them the choice of what is included. The boxes includes information on how to speak with children before and after a death, story books, booklets about someone's life, prompt cards and big and small teddies which can be kept by the adult and child to support their connection to one another. Some children decide to put the teddy in the coffin when the person has died so they will always be connected. The boxes can be decorated by the family with drawings, photos, letters and every child in the family will receive the resources to ensure inclusion and equality.

Why?

It can be overwhelming knowing where to start so these resources provide prompts and suggestions that may be helpful for families. Every resource is optional and only a guide for families of what they could include. We know the importance of memories for children and young people as they grow up and keeping that connection with the person who has died.

When a child is bereaved as they grow throughout their childhood into adulthood, they can revisit their grief at many different times. Many people assume that if a baby/small infant is bereaved, that over time they will forget the person who has died and that they won't be impacted by the death as they won't remember the person. Research and people's experiences say otherwise and that in fact, it can be hugely impactful as they can grieve the loss of the relationship and lack of memories and of not knowing who the person was. These resources allow the patient to share their life story and the legacy they want to leave behind to their children and grandchildren. Through the provision of resources and support, we believe that this can lend its hand to continuing bonds for many children and young people and support the many nuances, complexities and unresolved grief that many adults bereaved as children can experience. (ABC Grief, 2024).

As children revisit their grief throughout their lives, these resources can act as a reminder of their person. Children should not be expected to work through their grief in a set order and leave this behind them, but in fact they will carry this with them throughout their life and learn to integrate their loved one into their new life going forward (What's Your Grief, 2014).

Approach

The Child and Families Service receives referrals from a wide range of sources including healthcare professionals, school staff, hospice staff as well as self referrals from patients and families themselves.

Once we receive a referral, we contact the family to discuss how we can best support them with their needs and provide resources accordingly.

Each keepsake and memory box is made up specifically for each person and can adapt the resources to best support the families needs. We can offer assistance to families who would like support working on the resources and provide them with information and guidance on what to include.

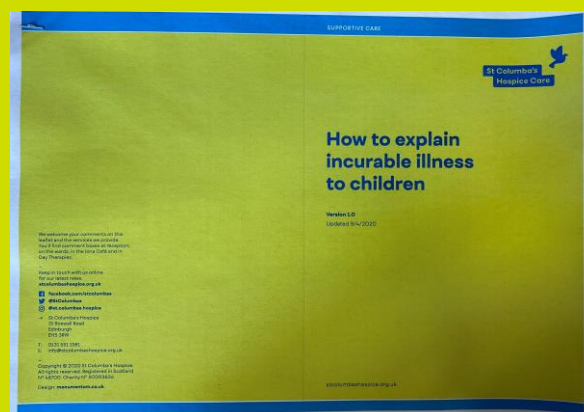
Some families prefer to work on the resources themselves and are look to us to provide the resources for them. We support families with as much or little support that they need and remain a person-centered approach.

Keepsake/Memory Resources

Each box is made up for each individual person and they are able to have choice over what is included inside their box. Each box contains an information leaflet explaining how each of the resources can be used however this is only a guide and families can choose how they use the resources to best support them.



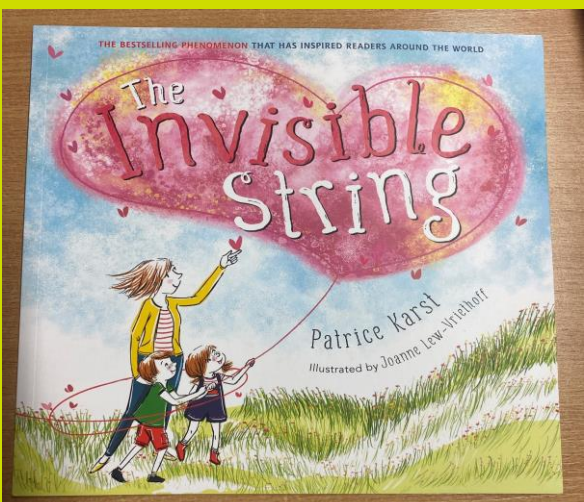
Keepsake/Memory Box. This box allows families to safely store their memories and special keepsakes. The box can be decorated with photographs, letters or memories or just left as it is.



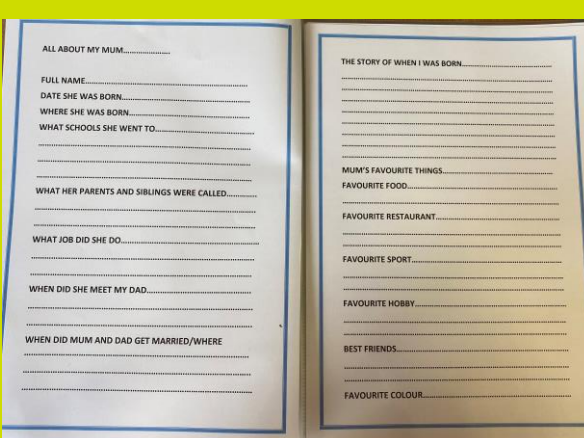
Leaflet. We provide information leaflets on 'How to explain incurable illness to children' and 'How to explain when someone has died'. These leaflets provide information on how to have these difficult conversations and examples of phrases that can be helpful for children's understanding. We include the relevant leaflet in the box and these are also available to print from our website when required.



Big n Small Bunnies. The idea with the bunnies is that the big bunny represents the parent/carer and the small bunny represents the child. The adult keeps the small bunny and the child keeps the big bunny. This can be a comforting resource for children and adults. Some families find comfort in placing the small bunny in the coffin so the child knows their person has their bunny with them.



Invisible string book. A lovely book about separation and connectedness. This tells the story of a parent explaining to their children about how we are all connected by an invisible string and how when we love someone, no matter the distance, we can keep connected by the love we have for them.



All about me book/ My book of memories about my. These books are filled with questions about a persons life and can be completed by the patient or their family as a way to keep their story and memories safe for sharing at a time of a child/young persons choosing. This may not be until they enter young adulthood or in later life.



Little bag of big thoughts. These cards act as a prompt to assist with letter writing as well as leaving messages for people.



Wooden hearts. These can be used in many different ways and the child can choose how they would like to use these. We suggest the parent/carer keeps a wooden heart and the child keeps a wooden heart. A message or name can be written on these and they can be kept with you as a reminder of your love for each other.

What the Families Say

'My children spray their bunnies with their dad's aftershave every night before bed so when they cuddle their bunny, they feel they are close to their dad.'

'The support we received from the team at the hospice was invaluable when it came to helping our daughter understand what was happening, as she was only 4 at the time. She was able to spend time decorating the memory box with her dad and they put in some drawings that they did together. We still look at the box regularly and my daughter wants to choose a small Christmas bauble to put in the memory box for him. The bunnies are also such a thoughtful gift - we gave the bunnies names together as a family and filled them both up with cuddles. This is especially useful now, that she knows bun bun is full of daddy cuddles. And she knows that the little bunny stayed with him, full of her cuddles. Many of the resources we've been given by the hospice bring a great deal of comfort and help create the continuing bond between us as a family.'

'My mum spoke with the family team at St Columba's Hospice, who gave her lots of advice to support us and arranged for us to collect memory boxes, full of things to help people our age to understand and cope through losing someone they love.'

'The resources are so touching and beautifully presented.'

'My daughter takes her bunny everywhere with her and finds this helpful to cuddle when her mum has hospital stays and they are apart.'

Conclusion

Reflecting on the feedback we have received from families this is a resources that is greatly beneficial to both patients and their families and provides great comfort therefore this is something we hope to continue to offer going forward. We will continue to adapt the resources to support the changing needs of children and their families.

The resources support open communication within a family and provide prompts for conversations. They offer a safe space for memories and protecting the connection to the person who has died supporting continuing bonds while bringing great comfort to families.

Although the resources themselves are a great resources for children we can not forget the important role that support sessions play in allowing children the opportunity to explore their grief and aid their understanding for children who need this support. (not all children do)

'Grief is not about letting go—grief is about finding ways to continue the connection even as we live a different, now changed life.' (Doka, 2019)

References

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