

## Handout for carers and adoptive parents

### **Loss and bereavement: making a memory box**

Children often feel threatened or worried that they may forget an important person once they have been separated from them. This could be either following a permanent placement with no further contact or after a bereavement. They may also have lots of different memories of that person; these memories may be happy or sad. Some children might like to have somewhere to collect all their treasured items or memories. A memory box provides a personalised store for an individual child.

A child may feel that their memory box is very private and that they do not wish to share it, or they may wish to share it with family and friends. The box can be as big or as small as they wish, the choice is theirs. A shoebox, either covered in wrapping paper of their choice or personalised by photographs or drawings would make an ideal memory box.

What might go into the memory box?

- Photographs
- Drawings or pictures showing important times together
- A poem the child might like to write about the person
- Items that remind them of the person
- Items that were important to the person
- A story written by the child about the person, what made them happy or sad, their favourite hobbies, foods, plants, animals, etc.
- A letter expressing some of the things that they wished they had said
- A tape of a favourite song
- Important dates for the special person: birthday, Christmas, the date of their last meeting, the date the person died
- Just about anything that will help your child to remember, and remind them of what the person meant to them
- A note detailing when the memory box was started and who it belongs to

The child may like to talk to you about important events and dates to help them remember. You may choose to do something special if they have told you that a particular day is important to them. Of course, adults can make memory boxes too.

## Understanding Childhood

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into the child's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to make sense of their behaviour.

This leaflet was originally published by the Child Psychotherapy Trust.

Leaflets available from:

[www.understandingchildhood.net](http://www.understandingchildhood.net)

email: [info@understandingchildhood.net](mailto:info@understandingchildhood.net)

# bereavement

## helping parents and children cope when someone close to them dies

How best can you help your child when someone close to them dies? What if you are grieving too? Do children grieve in the same way as adults? What about very young children? What is 'normal' grieving in a child and what do you need to worry about? This leaflet suggests ways that adults can help children to come to terms with grief and bereavement.

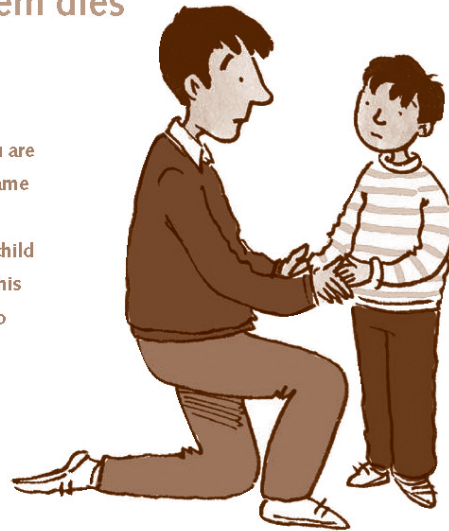
### Children's thoughts about death

Children will have many experiences of loss and separation as part of their normal development. Even when they have not experienced a bereavement, children will have lots of thoughts about death. This is part of their healthy curiosity about life – like thoughts about their body, sex, or birth.

Adults may find it difficult to talk about death because of anxieties about their own mortality or for fear of upsetting other people, but children may be ready and willing to talk about their anxieties. It is important for a child to feel that there are adults who are strong enough to bear whatever they want to talk about and to answer their questions. Indeed, being prepared to listen to their child's thoughts, beliefs and fears can be the most useful way in which parents and other important adults in their lives – such as teachers, carers and GPs – can help children.

### Breaking the news

It can be very difficult to tell a child about the death of a parent, brother or sister, close relative, or friend. You may want to protect the child or feel that it is better if they do not know the truth. But children are quick to pick up when their own observations about important



things are denied. A conspiracy of silence will not spare them from pain – it will bewilder and frighten them. They need to be told about the death in simple terms that are appropriate for their age, so that they can begin to grapple with the implications and will continue to trust you as someone they can turn to.

It is harder for everyone when the death is sudden. If there have been weeks or months in which to prepare the child for the death, they will find it easier to accept. But that does not take away the pain. Death is always a shock.

### Religion

Religious beliefs often include a concept of life after death. This may be comforting for the child if you really believe it. However, it does not erase the loss of the loved person now – in this life – nor does it answer questions about why God took them away, especially if the person who died was young.

### Children's responses to death

Children have different responses to death and dying depending on their age and experiences. There are no clear-cut stages, no



correct order, no set time for grief to last, so try not to think about it in terms of a 'right way' to grieve.

The age of the child affects the ways in which they are likely to express their feelings and the kind of support they need from the adults around them. It is important for children not to feel under pressure to display more conventional signs of grief and for them to be allowed to grieve in their own way and in their own time.

Parents need to be prepared for young children to slip in and out of grief in a way that can be shocking and upsetting to a grieving adult.

- They may switch between tears and misery and demands for food and treats, which is very hard for adults to sympathise with or respond to.
- They may make requests that appear extraordinarily heartless to an adult – 'As granny is dead, can I have her blue necklace?' 'Can I sleep in John's room now that he's died?'

It may help to know about some fairly typical reactions that you may notice.

### Very young children and babies

If a significant death occurs in the life of a child aged under two years, they will not have much language to express their loss. However, even very young children and babies are aware that people they were attached to have gone, and experience the dawning realisation that they are never coming back and that death is permanent.

For very young children, who are unable to speak, death might be described as an unnameable fear or dread. You know how inconsolably a baby or young child can cry if they feel unsafe, or if a parent goes out of the room or leaves them for longer than they can bear. If the loved one does not return, young children can be left with fears for their own survival.

Adults can usually comfort children if they are not too upset themselves. Even very young babies will be affected by their parents' emotional state and a death in the family will affect other family members. This may disrupt their care, so some scar may well be left. Try to minimise other disruptions and changes. In time, within the setting of a steady and loving environment, the loss can be repaired to some extent.

It is important for the child, and those caring for them, to keep the memories of the dead person alive. As the child grows up, there will be opportunities to understand better what they suffered before there was shared speech.

### Young children

Children aged between two and five years are beginning to grasp that death is final, and that the dead person is not coming back. This is difficult for them to acknowledge fully as it threatens the security of their safe familiar world. Deep down, any too-long separation leaves them feeling frightened for their own survival.

During these years they will form several very important attachments to adults and

children. If their development has gone well, they will have a reasonably secure picture of their loved ones inside them – a sort of ‘mummy or daddy inside their mind’ – that provides solace during separations.

If the loss is not of a very close relative, they may be curious and affected by the event, but will probably absorb it in their play and everyday activities. If, tragically, it is the death of someone very important, they will go through a similar grief process to adults.

### Children aged 6 to 12

Children in this age range begin to develop a more mature understanding of death and life, and are becoming aware that everyone dies one day, including themselves. They want to know more about the actual cause of death – ‘Why cancer?’ ‘Why suicide?’

They may retreat into denial, unable to express feeling. If they appear stuck and cannot grieve, they may need professional help – someone who can bear their withdrawal – especially if the important adults in their life are grieving too.

At this age, children like to feel that the world is an ordered place, with routine and structure playing a significant part. They are beginning to move away from the family to make important relationships with other children and with school. The death of someone close can easily throw them back to feeling unsafe, and to being more dependent. They may feel less calm emotionally, and more like a younger pre-school child, who is up and down in their feelings.

### Adolescents

Adolescents are often full of thoughts about life and death issues, or the ‘meaning of life’. On the other hand, they can be so busy living life to the full that they rarely stop to reflect deeply. They may be unaware of their feelings, burying them until they surface much later at a vulnerable time in their lives.

A significant death can make a teenager feel particularly thrown because it may go against their strong belief in their own future and that of others. They can feel insecure just when they are starting to separate more from the family. You may notice that they do any of the following:

- withdraw into a very private existence

- go back to behaving like a younger child
- appear to be very matter-of-fact and detached, worried about emotions overwhelming them
- become angry and protesting.

As these tendencies are often a part of normal adolescent development, it may be difficult for you to know when to persist in your offers of help.

If the young person is managing school and social life, as well as eating and sleeping reasonably normally, you can probably wait for the normal grieving process to run its bumpy course. The support of their friends may be particularly important for them.

More than ever, they need the love that you have tried to provide all along. They also have even more need of the limits that you have set.

They may like to talk to someone outside the family who is not in danger of being too upset by hearing about what they are feeling, but it is best not to assume that this is automatically wanted or needed.

### Traumatic death

Children who have witnessed one or more dramatic deaths, or been involved in a disaster, accident, or other trauma – including terrorist attacks – may need specialised treatment. This may also be the case if a loved one has died in a sudden, dramatic or violent way.

If there has been a tragedy at school, or the school has been exposed to violence, parents need to be prepared for the ‘ripple effect’ of a trauma, even when the child has not been directly involved. Parents, schools and other groups in the community may also need help. These experiences are often too shocking and disruptive to be absorbed and may need to be worked through over time.

Children who watch appalling events on television may shift unpredictably between anxiety, excitement, indifference, obsessive interest and unreality.

If you are in any doubt about the matter, in general it is better to seek help than not to do so.

Specialised help is available through: The Children’s Team, Traumatic Stress Clinic, 73 Charlotte Street, London W1T 4PL. Phone 020 7530 3666 for enquiries about referrals to the team; you may need to request a referral from your GP.

## Signs of children grieving

- **Numbness and disbelief** Simply try to comfort them. Try not to make them talk about it – they may be too frightened just now. Be patient and offer comfort.
- **Shock** This may include disturbed sleep, being unable to go to sleep, fear of the dark and nightmares. Again, they need lots of comfort and patient attention.
- **Denial** They may well deny that the death has happened. Denial is a necessary anaesthetic. In time the reality will come through their self-protection. There's no need to repeatedly 'put them straight'.
- **Regression** Under the stress of their loss, children of all ages may regress to earlier stages of development (just as adults do) and need extra care and comfort. Although you may worry about this behaviour, it is important to try and see it as expressing a need to be looked after and to be held. It is an opportunity for you to help children rebuild the security they've lost.
- **Anger and appeals** They may protest with anger or appeals – older children and adolescents may say something like 'How could he have left me?' or 'Why didn't the doctors make her better?' Try to acknowledge their anger. It is a very human response to be angry and to feel abandoned. This may be very hard for you when you may feel exhausted and may be angry and desperate yourself. If you agree with any of what they say, let them know that you feel the same way. It is helpful for them to know that they are not alone with their feelings. Give them permission to cry.
- **Change of habits** Children may be restless and unable to settle to anything. Some children will eat a great deal, and even store food, to fill up the emptiness they feel inside. Others may lose interest in eating. Some children start to bite their nails, to pick at themselves, twiddle with their hair and so on.
- **Despair** They may feel despair. Again, it is hard to help a child who is despairing if you are full of despair too, but it does them no harm to see you cry and to know that you are also struggling.
- **Guilt** They may feel that they contributed to the death. You can reassure the child that nothing they did or said or felt caused the



death. Tell them that lots of people feel guilty when someone they love dies, or wonder if they did something wrong.

- **Imaginary sightings** They may search for the person who has died, expecting them to come back and even feeling they've seen them in the street. This is a normal universal response. It is a necessary process before children realise that the person who has died is not ever coming back. You may be able to gently help them believe in the finality of the death, but it can take much longer than anyone realises.
- **Acceptance** They will eventually understand that the person has died. Even though they probably feel very low, and perhaps lonely and rejected, it is necessary to truly believe that the person has died before anyone can begin to let them go, while holding on to precious memories.
- **Life goes on** Eventually they will realise that life goes on and that the loved person who has died is alive in their minds – a helpful part of their imagination for ever. Some 'recovery' may begin to take place after a few months, but where the death was particularly sudden and close it takes much longer, perhaps years.

## These suggestions may be helpful

- There is no easy way of taking away the pain, although of course we wish we could. Pain is the price we pay for having loved someone.
- Use straightforward words like dead and dying. With young children, try to link it with a known loss, such as the death of a pet (which may also cause more grief for the child than the parents expect).
- Children under the age of about four often think that sleeping and death are the same. Older children sometimes think this too. The difference needs to be explained – for instance ‘When you are asleep your body works very well’.
- Avoid phrases like ‘He’s gone to sleep’, or ‘She’s gone away’, or ‘We lost Gran’. These phrases can be confused with everyday occurrences, and may lead to fears about going to sleep, being abandoned or getting lost.
- Make it clear to younger children that this means that the body of the person who has died is no longer working, and that they don’t feel any pain. Your child needs help to realise the body has not gone anywhere, other than perhaps to the cemetery or crematorium. Go through this carefully as children may need to be clear about what happens to the body. In some cultures or families children may see the body after death. Indeed, it may be helpful to do so.
- Going to the funeral and the cemetery may be very helpful. Many children will choose to go to the funeral if they understand that it’s a special time to say goodbye, remember the person and celebrate their life. Try to explain what they will see, in simple terms in advance. For example, ‘The body is in a box that gets buried in a hole in the ground’ or ‘It goes into a fire and the ashes of the body are sprinkled on the ground’.
- Religious rituals and cultural beliefs may be helpful and comforting if they are part of your family’s life.
- Be prepared to tell the story, and to answer the same questions, over and over again. It is important for your child to understand and have the story straight in their mind, but be prepared for them to be really confused at times.
- Children can be anxious about expressing their own grief for fear of upsetting you further, especially if they think there is no one else to look after you. You may find that involving another adult to comfort the child helps to share the load.
- Your own grief can be shared with the child, but try not to offload it onto them. This could give them the feeling that there is no space for their own grief. Parents need to avoid robbing children of their own experiences – for instance, by saying ‘I know how you feel’. No one can know how another person really feels.
- It is important for the child to continue to have opportunities to share their feelings about the person they have lost. You can help by collecting photos, for instance, or making a story. There is never a time that a dead person is ‘forgotten’. They stay in our minds, sometimes in the background, as long as we ourselves live.

## Getting help

Even though the grieving process is normal, at times you may feel the need to discuss your anxieties. You may wish to approach a teacher, health visitor, GP, or child psychotherapist for support or guidance for

you or your child during this difficult time. However, it is important not to assume that your child needs to see someone. This may be so, but it may also be helpful for you to find the support to think about your own concerns and perhaps strengthen your ability to help the child yourself.

## Further help

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

### Contacts

**Cruse Bereavement Care**  
Phone (national rate): 0870 167 1677  
(national helpline)  
Web [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

**Winston's Wish**  
Guidance and information for families of bereaved children.  
Phone (local rate): 0845 2030 405  
Web [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

**YoungMinds Parents' Information Service**  
Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person.  
Freephone 0800 018 2138  
Web [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

**Parentline**  
Help and advice for anyone looking after a child.  
Freephone 0808 800 2222  
Web [www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

**ChildcareLink**  
Information about child care in your local area.  
Freephone 0800 096 0296  
Web [www.childcarelink.gov.uk](http://www.childcarelink.gov.uk)

**Contact a Family**  
Help for parents and families who care for children with any disability or special need.  
Freephone 0808 808 3555  
Web [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

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Handout for carers and adoptive parents

## **Helping children develop emotionally and behave well**

**Build a positive relationship with your child**

Building a positive relationship with a child is the best way to help them develop positive emotional wellbeing. You have a central role in helping them learn how to tolerate frustration, be able to calm down, know how to behave acceptably in society, and relate to others in a healthy way.

**Show you are listening to them**

Showing a child that you are listening to them and that you understand that they are trying to communicate with you is an important part of developing a two-way relationship. You may not always know immediately what they are attempting to tell you but they will feel more secure knowing that you are open to hearing about their feelings.

**Find support for yourself**

There may be times when both you and the child might find feelings overwhelming. It is at these times that logical clear thought seems to be most difficult. Finding support for yourself is extremely important part of your own emotional wellbeing. In taking care of your emotions you may feel better able to help the child with his. Regaining a sense of calm may make what you thought was an unmanageable situation seem less difficult.

**Stay calm and try to work out what the child is feeling**

Carers have often commented that at difficult times it is hard to look past a child's behaviour and think about how they are feeling. Finding ways to stay calm can not only support you but also help you to look past the behaviour and see the message they may be giving and why they behaved in that particular way.

**Accept angry and frustrated feelings and offer calm or comforting words and actions**

Helping children to calm down so that they will eventually learn what it feels like to calm themselves is an important skill for life. For example staying close to the child and offering words of comfort and an affectionate gentle hug to let them know you are there for them and helping them to cope with their anger and frustration. As children get older, being able to tolerate frustration and cope with strong emotions may positively affect the way they behave towards other people.

**Give children a way to back down without losing face**

Children respond far more positively towards loving, predictable, behaviour and clear boundaries. Avoiding threats and harsh punishment and excessive shouting will help both you and the child develop a more respectful and positive relationship. Giving children a way of saving face and an opportunity to change their behaviour is important in helping them to learn that relationships are about how both people feel.

## Lay foundations by praising positive behaviour

Choosing behaviour techniques such as positive praise and encouragement, distraction, time out to calm down, or rewarding good behaviour instead of focusing on difficult behaviour, will help lay the foundations for later negotiations on acceptable limits to behaviour.

Rules and routines help children feel safe...

... but be flexible where necessary

Boundaries and rules are often an important part of family life. They can offer a sense of security and predictability for the child. Boundaries that are most effective are those that are appropriate to the child's age.

While it is good to be consistent in putting agreed rules and boundaries into place, it is also helpful for a degree of flexibility. There may be occasions when it is appropriate not to stick rigidly to the rule such as when a child is ill.

If boundaries are changed for other reasons it is best to avoid making decisions at the height of an argument or in anger. The message about new rules may be lost as one or both of you struggle to keep control of your emotions.

*You will have times when you feel helpless and useless. Although it is easier said than done, try and have some confidence in your ability as a carer.*

Do not make unrealistic rules – make a few rules and stick to them

As children grow and develop there will be decisions to be made about changes in boundaries. Talking to a child about why new boundaries are planned will help them co-operate more readily.

*Difficult behaviour usually has a meaning, even though sometimes it is not clear what the meaning is. You may need to keep an open mind for a while about what is causing the difficulty. A child may have little idea about why he is getting cross or upset and behaving in the way he is.*

*You will need to decide what you think is acceptable behaviour, so that if other people criticise you for the child's behaviour, you will be more sure of your ground.*

Share one-to-one time with the child

Sharing time with the child to help develop a positive relationship is important. Within a family children may have different individual needs. This may include giving different age appropriate bedtimes.

Think about the things that shape you as a carer

It may be useful to spend some time thinking about the way you want to care for the child. You may choose to discuss this with your partner and family members. Each carer's experience of being cared for as a child may be different and can raise difficult issues for some couples who may feel they want to care for children differently. Children can feel confused by receiving different messages from adults in their lives, so it might be really useful to think about how you would like to be as a carer.

Handout for carers and adoptive parents

## **Fun interactions with baby are really important**

### Babies are individuals

All babies are different; some are calm, some are active. At first, it can be confusing to know what a baby needs and how to respond and this can be particularly difficult in the early weeks of placement. This leaflet has been designed to help you tune in to the baby. This will promote a good strong bond between you. We also hope you'll find the suggested activities good fun.

### Building strong relationships

Bonding can sometimes take time, even for birth parents. There are lots of things that might influence the way your relationship develops, including:

- the experiences the baby had before coming to you
- baby's temperament
- how you look at, speak to and handle the baby
- how you are feeling
- how much support you are getting with the baby, particularly if their distress of previous experience triggers feelings in you related to your own life journey.

Your positive, calm interactions with the baby help him or her to be calm too. And using different ways to interact not only helps to build a strong bond between you, but also stimulates baby's brain development.

### Developing healthy baby brains

A baby's brain development speeds up after birth so your interactions in these early months are very important. From day one, babies are learning about their adults' feelings, words and touches. All these experiences stimulate healthy brain growth, setting up strong connections for their future learning. Young babies who have had good experiences of interaction with their carers are more able to learn about how to communicate with others. These children are more likely to do better in school, make friends more easily and display fewer behavioural difficulties later on in childhood.

### Babies love to communicate with you

Watch closely and you will see that baby is sending out signals. This is their way of saying 'Hey! Over here! Come and interact with me!' They often let you know they're ready to interact by looking for your face or turning round until you have eye contact. Once you are looking at each other babies often make more facial expressions, move their bodies and make more noises. They often follow this by increasing face and body movements and making more noises. Imagine this like a dance – by following your baby's lead you can join in the steps at a level baby feels comfortable with.

Babies also have ways to tell you when they've had enough. They might do this by turning or looking away, yawning, or putting their hands to their face.

Babies who have not had responsive care in the past may be harder to read as they may have developed other ways to connect with their adult. If their care has been hurtful or harming they may for a short time avoid contact altogether, becoming withdrawn or particularly quiet. This can sometimes be seen by adults as the baby being a 'good' baby.

Babies who have used these responses in the past to help them deal with difficult situations may need extra time to become familiar with the ways a new trusting and predictable adult communicates with them.

## Most important of all: relax!

Most caring adults naturally provide all the right kinds of interactions with babies in their care so the most important thing for you to do is slow down, relax and spend time with the baby. There are hundreds of interactions between you and the baby occurring everyday during normal activities like feeding, nappy changing and bathing and these are real opportunities to get to know each other.

Here are a few carer-and-baby activities that we know are really helpful both for baby brain development and for developing healthy relationships.

Before starting these activities, why not have a go at watching baby closely and trying to work out the different ways he or she is trying to tell you something?

### 1 Taking turns to talk to each other

After spending nine months in the womb, babies can recognise their mother's voice as early as a few minutes after birth. When baby comes to you he or she may need time to learn your speech rhythms and patterns. Babies are biologically wired up to tune into the sound of a predictable voice and will soon begin to show a noticeable response when they hear you.

Talking gently or singing to baby stimulates brain development and helps them learn about communication and also that you are a safe, dependable carer. This helps build trust.

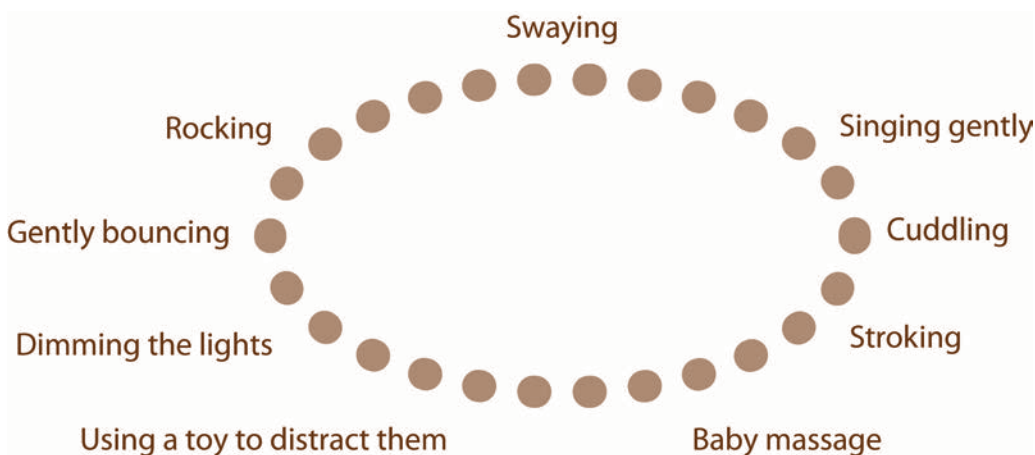
Try to spend a few minutes, several times a day, holding baby, preferably face-to-face if you think baby is becoming comfortable with this type of close trusting contact, copying their noises and expressions, or singing nursery rhymes.

Babies also have ways of 'talking' to you using body movements and sounds. Lots of wriggly arm and leg movements with excited noises is a baby's way of saying he or she likes what's happening. As you get used to the ways baby acts you will begin to recognise the way he or she appears to say different things. For example if they are turning away, arching their back or putting their hand to their face this may be his way of saying, 'I've had enough of that for now thanks'. Watch him closely and you will start to notice these baby ways of 'talking'.

## 2 Trying out ways to calm the baby

Babies use crying as one way of communicating. It's specifically designed to let the adult know they need something and to get us to respond as soon as possible! Sometimes they're saying 'I'm hungry', 'I'm too hot' or 'I've got a wet nappy'. But just like adults, all babies have times when they feel tired, irritable, bored, frightened or just need to have a little cry to feel better again. This is when they need their adults to help them become calm again and manage these tricky feelings.

You could try:



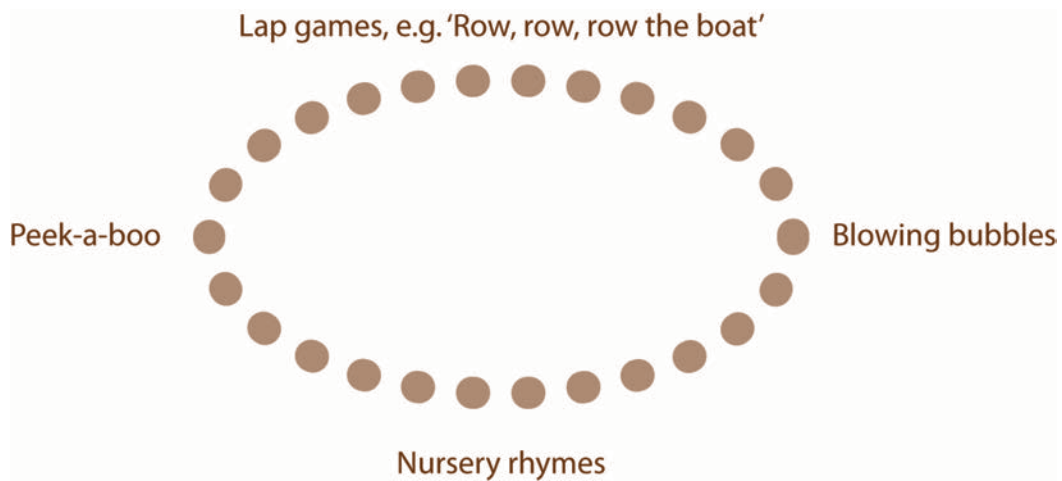
Babies often use objects to calm themselves, like blankets, soft toys or sucking their own fingers. It is important that if baby uses a comfort that his or her social worker tells you this and it comes with him or her. These activities are important parts of baby's emotional world so try to continue to use them for as long as he needs them, or think of other things that can replace them.

Scratch mittens can stop a baby using his or her hands to explore their own face and mouth and touching you, which is an important part of their emotional development. Try only to use mittens when your baby's hands might get cold outside.

## 3 Faces are fun!

Babies are especially interested in human faces. Looking at responsive faces helps stimulate social and emotional centres in the baby brain. Playing face-to-face activities with carers also helps them learn where sounds come from and how people use different facial expressions to communicate feelings. At first baby may only manage a little time. As you begin to understand and respond to his communications to you, he will manage a longer time.

You could try:



#### 4 Copying each other

Babies love to copy you, and they really love you to copy them! When you watch closely you will see baby trying to copy your mouth and face movements. They often need 10 to 15 seconds to copy you, so be sure to wait for a while to give them a chance. You can also copy their actions and their sounds, which helps them to watch you closely, building concentration and promoting turn taking.

#### 5 Become a sports commentator!

Babies are listening from day one. They have no idea what your words mean now, but they will in time. Babies do learn a great deal from the tone, pitch and quality of your voice so keep talking to them. Chatting along is just fine.

Babies also listen to you as a way of understanding how to interpret their own feelings and sensations. You can help by giving them a running commentary like a sports announcer. It might feel a bit silly but your baby will love it! You might say things like 'Hey, you're looking at Matthew to see what he's doing!', 'You're getting very excited looking at that toy!' It's a bit like imagining doing the voices to the film 'Look Who's Talking' – putting baby's experiences into words as if he or she could talk.

#### 6 Learning about feelings

Babies have very strong emotional experiences and can seem to be full of sadness, rage or despair at times. From day one, they need you to help them learn about feelings and how to cope with them.

One of the first steps is for you to give baby's feelings a name.

This can be trickier than it sounds! It's difficult to know exactly how a baby is feeling, but using phrases like 'That's a happy face!' or 'You look like that's upset you a bit' do help even the tiniest baby to learn that you are trying your best to understand and help.

## 7 Looking at books together

Babies like looking at books from a really early age. This is a great activity for many reasons – it stimulates brain development in areas related to visual understanding, learning sounds, and facial expressions. This is a time when you can talk to baby about their history before they came to you – even though they will not understand it yet, it is an important rehearsal for the future.

Try to find a way to look at books where you can see each other's face.

## 8 Rhymes, rhythms and repetition

Simple rhythms and tunes will really help baby to learn about sounds and words – that's why we naturally raise the pitch of our voices and use a sing song tone when we speak to a young child. Babies need to hear rhymes and songs over and over again because it stimulates brain pathways to strengthen and grow.

Interacting with baby in these ways will help you form a healthy, strong relationship and will stimulate the baby's brain in all the right places.

## Older babies start to get clingy

Around 8 to 10 months, babies have a tendency to become clingy for a while, although this might happen earlier or later for some babies. They may seem nervous of strangers and cry more if you leave the room. They may refuse to sleep on their own or try to follow you around more at this stage. He might continue in this stage for a longer period if his development has been delayed by moves of placement, but it is a stage and will pass in its own time.

This is a key time for baby to learn about trust; he needs short separations from you so that he can learn that you do always come back. You may need to be particularly sensitive and thoughtful at this time as he may have experienced traumatic separation in the past.

Try to gently encourage baby's first steps into independence by helping him cope with the strong feelings that arise when you are apart. For example, let baby know you'll be back after he or she has had a nap or a short stay with another caring adult. Sometimes babies like to keep a special toy or one of your belongings with them while you're away. It will take several times of being apart before he baby starts to learn that he can cope with his feelings while you are apart, but once this happens his confidence will blossom.

This is often a difficult time for parents and carers too, as you may be getting used to your own feelings of separation from the baby.

## Handout for carers and adoptive parents

### Play: a child's perspective

The words – possible alternative meaning for insecure child

I don't know how this works – Have you noticed me?

I can't do it – I need you

I like it when grandma plays with me – I need to like grandma because mummy says so

I want mummy to play with me – I am not sure who mummy is

I want to copy mummy – she puts things in the oven too – Are you my mummy or can you be my mummy?

I'm bored – This is too hard for me or this reminds me of something I don't like, or I'm bored

Why does daddy keep taking my bricks away? – Why doesn't daddy play with me right?

How come he can play with my toys? – What's mine to keep? Or why aren't my things special too?

I'm not as good at that as she is – I'm no good at anything

That's MINE! – That's MINE!

I wonder if that will hurt? – Is this a safe place?

I don't want to do it your way – I am used to doing things for myself because no one did them for me

But I like to paint the faces blue – I need to know what this experience is like

Who cares 'How many there are?' – I can't think because my feelings take over

How come it's time to stop – we're having fun! – I need more of this

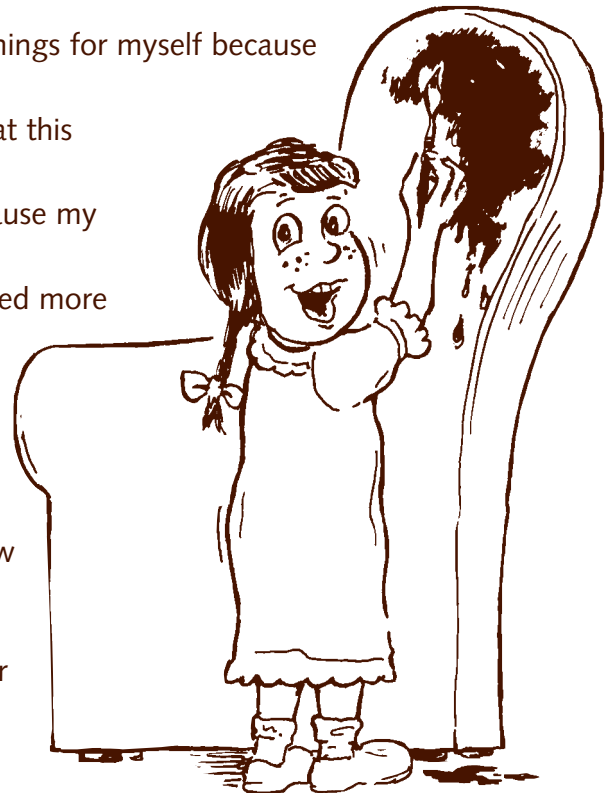
I don't want to play – I always end up having to tidy up – I only get things when I am good

I wonder how far I can throw this? – How big am I, or will this carer stop me?

Look, I can paint the whole settee blue! – I don't know that this isn't OK because no one taught me

I wonder what happens when you eat this? – I don't know that this isn't OK because no one looked out for me

Now I've made two pencils out of one – Please don't be angry, I am trying to please you.



## Handout for carers and adoptive parents **Play: carer's and adoptive parent's perspective**

The words – possible alternative meaning for carer

This is going to be so much fun– I want to get it right – I want to make it fun

Why can't you just play quietly? – I need some space

Stop bothering me – I'm busy I need some space and you are in the way

Can't you ask 'daddy' to play with you – I'm too tired, I need some space, you are in the way, and you can find someone else

It's all very well other people playing with him – They don't have the tea to cook, the washing to do, the shopping to get – This child takes too much of my time

There's no way I'm playing with her after she's been so naughty today – I really don't understand why she punishes me like this

Stop putting things in the oven! – No exploring

I'm bored – I am overwhelmed by this child

I quite like building with bricks! – I would like to do that with you or this meets my need

Why can't you two just share nicely! – My expectation is that sharing is nice

Look! I can build a great castle! – Look how good your carer is

If you're not going to share then I'll take the toys off you – I don't understand that you may never have had your own things

It's your own fault – I told you not to climb up – I did not keep you safe enough

Why don't you listen! – I don't understand that adults have not taught you to listen so listening might be too scary or you are preoccupied by checking your environment is safe

I don't know how to play with children – Perhaps I'm not good enough

My parents never played with me, kids these days are so demanding – I don't know the pleasure of really being attended to

He'll never learn if he insists on painting everything the wrong colours – It should be done right (my way)

I don't have any good ideas, what if he thinks I'm dull – Perhaps I'm not good enough

This is a fun way to learn numbers and colours – I really like being with you

No matter how long I play with them, it's never enough for them – There is not enough of me to fill the hole in this child

If children get something out, they've got to learn to put it away again – Experiences are conditional

Oh no, look at all that blue paint everywhere! – I did not contain this play well enough

Will you just play nicely! – Don't be yourself

Stop eating/throwing/breaking everything – Don't be yourself

I'm not too good at reading – what if my child asks me to read her a book? – Perhaps



I'm not good enough

## Handout for carers and adoptive parents

### Let's play!

This leaflet is designed to help adoptive parents and foster carers understand why play is so important for children and includes suggestions for fun activities, which we hope you will enjoy doing together.

#### All children need to play

All children are different, but every child is born with a natural desire to play and explore. Play is like a child's job – it is how they learn about and understand the world around them.

#### What is play?

Babies start playing and communicating from the minute they are born. When a baby watches an adult's face or listens to an adult's voice, he is starting to learn about taking turns, having fun and being playful with another person. This develops into exchanging smiles and giggles, looking at things together and exploring toys and objects. A baby may not have had those experiences, so the times you can offer these will be of benefit to the child in the short and long term.

Young children don't need lots of expensive toys – the packaging of the toys is often more interesting for them – a cardboard box can become a car, a spaceship and lots of other interesting things.

The most important factors in play are your time and your joint imaginations. You can help by watching him play, waiting to see what catches his attention, and helping him to explore those things in his own unique way.

#### Children can lead the way!

When children play, they often like to lead the way.

The first step for you is to recognise what the child is interested in and to follow his lead. This is not a passive process of just watching, but following and encouraging the baby's or child's way of expressing himself. It is important to try and pick up on cues of wanting you to join in, wanting to change their focus of attention or wanting to stop playing a particular game. This isn't always easy and can be a case of trial and error – he will soon let you know whether you are wanted as an active play partner, or watcher, at any particular time.

Children's play can tell us a lot about how they are thinking and feeling. For children who are too young to 'talk' in words, their play will be like their part of a conversation. Early on in your relationship with the child, your attention and sensitivity to what he is trying to communicate is very important. Even if you are not sure what he is trying to say, trying to understand will show that you are interested in him and trying to make a connection. Children tend to be very

generous in their efforts to help us to understand them and so don't worry if you feel confused at first, you will get lots more chances!

Mirroring your baby's facial expressions, and imitation, can seem like just a bit of fun but this can really help baby to learn about himself and his feelings. The more secure the child feels, the more he will be able to explore and experiment with new things in a creative way.

Stimulation is important for a child and there are so many fascinating toys around for children to play with. Even though the child will be able to learn certain things from playing with his toys, if he shows you he would like you to join in too that will make playtime a much more meaningful experience. It will also encourage much needed social skills for when he joins nursery or preschool.

Play is an ideal opportunity for a child to learn to focus his or her attention, imitate actions and sounds, take turns, anticipate what comes next, recognise when something is hidden that it still exists, understand new words, say new words and pretend.

As well as this in playing the child will experience feelings and stimulation and while playing with you will learn important skills in how to enjoy and be part of a relationship

It is well known that the skills used in play are the basics for a child learning to communicate through language, so playing together is also teaching him language skills, such as taking turns in a conversation or recognising the beginning and ending of a conversation.

Children need to believe that their efforts are worthwhile and considered important enough to be taken seriously and to be given the time to be understood and listened to. Play really is a serious business.

Some children who are fostered or adopted will not have had many opportunities for play with their birth parents. Playing with them provides lots of opportunities for building trust and understanding.

Some children who have been in care may want to play in a way that seems too young for their age, or babyish. This is a normal way for children whose development has been interrupted by their experiences – don't worry if this happens. It shows that they feel safe enough with you to relive or 'redo' the experiences they have missed out on in the past.

The best way to teach children new skills like counting, learning shapes, colours and words is to for you to point out the things they are already interested in and playing with, and then say the words for them. For example 'That's the blue square you've put in', 'You've got 1, 2, 3 little ducks' or 'There goes the big ball'.

It can be surprisingly difficult to let a child take the lead in play. You might want to play too, or make suggestions, or ask questions so that they learn things. You might even feel that he is in control and worry that he may become spoilt. Remember there are so many benefits in play this is unlikely if you play too and

follow the child's lead. A child enjoys play best when you describe what they are already doing, rather than asking too many questions or making suggestions.

Sometimes a child will do things that aren't quite correct, like putting a water cup on their head, painting a face in green, or playing a board game upside down. You might be concerned that this could lead them into bad habits or stop them from learning about how to do things right. But don't worry, what might seem to you to be an incorrect use of a particular toy might actually be a clever and creative idea from the child exploring his imagination. Even better, the child will have great fun if you join in being silly.

## The best kinds of play are sometimes the messiest!

It can be really hard to let children make a big mess, but what might look to you like a huge mess may actually be a child's most creative moment. There are a number of reasons why messy play is so helpful for children's development. They get to experiment and explore in exciting ways, helping them to learn lots of new things about the world. Messy play also helps children to understand that sometimes things do get to be a real mess, but it can be sorted out and made OK again with a little bit of help from other people.

This is the start of learning about coping skills. Children who have been allowed to explore messy play and have been helped to learn how to tidy up start to understand that they are able to cope with messy feelings too. As they get older, when they come across difficult situations, they are able to tolerate these difficulties and think about ways to sort it out. So try not to get cross if they make a mess, and try to have fun with them helping you clear up afterwards.

Young children explore objects by putting them in their mouths and this is an important part of their learning. Young children see food as a great play opportunity because squishing, mashing and mixing their food is such a great way to learn about textures, colours and touch. If you are worried about the mess, get a plastic sheet or mat to put underneath their chair during mealtimes. They will grow out of it eventually.

## Play helps children learn about emotions

Children who have experienced positive play experiences with their carers, in which they have been able to take the lead, tend to develop better self-confidence and are better able to trust other people. This is because play helps children learn that they can have a positive impact on their surroundings and that adults will not intrude upon or control their imagination. You may need to help the child to learn this.

## Carers are important partners in a child's world of play

Sometimes children don't want to play with their carers, and this can make the carer feel hurt or rejected. If this happens, it can be tempting to start avoiding play times with the child, but this will often just make matters worse. You might

try just sitting near the child watching him or her play, without making too many comments at first. Remember, the child values your positive attention and words more than your suggestions or directions at this stage. If the child asks you to join in, try to follow their instructions about what to do – he will love this sense of being in charge for once!

## Some carers find it hard to play

It is not unusual for carers to find playing with their children a bit hard at times. This might be because they get bored at the child's need for constant repetition, or they might feel it is their responsibility to come up with all the ideas during play. Sometimes carers feel silly, or don't know what to do. There are times when carers might worry about allowing the child to play 'incorrectly' with things or be a bit silly. Don't worry if you feel like this as it is very common. Sometimes playing with a child may bring back memories from your own childhood, positive and negative. Occasionally these memories can get in the way of you and the child enjoying your play together. If this happens, you might find it helpful to talk it over with someone you feel comfortable with, for example your social worker, a friend or a family member.

We hope that this leaflet has shown you the importance of play. Given a few simple toys or objects and a bit of attention from you, most children will get to work imagining and pretending and having fun.

Here are some play and toy tips for playing with children from six months to four years.

### Play tips

During the first 6 months, babies enjoy:

- You! You are baby's favourite plaything – your face to look at and touch, your eyes, your voice, your singing
- Brightly coloured, noisy objects like mobiles or rattles
- Playing on the floor looking at and reaching for toys – this will help them learn to reach, roll over, kick their legs and move their arms
- A wide variety of objects that feel different – hard, soft, squashy, silky

During these early months, baby is learning about him or herself, about other people, and how the world sounds, looks, feels and smells. He or she is still new to the world and needs you and one or two favourite adults to help them make sense of what's happening.

## Play tips

Between 6 to 12 months of age, babies enjoy:

- Putting objects in and out of containers like boxes and tubs, and hearing you say the words 'in' and 'out'
- Grasping, banging, shaking and throwing and listening to you name the actions. This really helps a child learn about words even though he or she won't be able to say them just yet
- Water play, using sponges and plastic containers with holes in (never leave baby alone with water)
- Playing peek-a-boo with you
- Looking and pointing at things and hearing you say the names. It is really helpful for you to name things or copy the sounds he makes – don't worry about trying to get him to copy your words just yet
- Looking in mirrors, alone or with you
- Looking at simple books, holding the book, and putting it in their mouth. Letting him turn the pages will help him or her develop hand-eye co-ordination
- Enjoying nursery rhymes with you – it doesn't matter if you can't sing! It's all part of your baby learning to have fun with you
- Hide and find' games. For example, a saucepan with a lid can reveal a variety of different objects like a purse, a soft hairbrush, cotton reels. You can name each item as baby finds it, which helps him learn about words
- Crawling around on the floor, chasing after things that roll. Make sure your home is a safe place for a child to crawl

Babies of this age often want to do things over and over again because repetition is their brain's way of learning something well. They are interested in other children and may be curious and want to get close, but they still need you close by as a safe base to return to.

## Play tips

Between 1 to 2 years of age, your toddler might enjoy:

- 'Push and pull' toys, which help them to develop co-ordination skills
- Games to help them learn about using their hands and co-ordination such as building blocks, shape sorters, simple jigsaws and shape puzzles
- Crayoning (chubby crayons), finger painting
- Pretend play – tea sets, plastic food, dolls and teddies, copying everyday activities like cooking, washing, going to bed, going to the shops. This helps children develop imagination and also to understand how the world works
- Climbing in and out of large boxes, dens made with a bed sheet, large baskets. Never let a child play with plastic bags
- Helping you do things around the house like dusting or washing up. Children love to pour water between containers in the washing up bowl
- Enjoying musical activities with you – music, shakers, drums, singing, dancing, nursery rhymes
- Picture books, very simple story books, holding books to look at, pointing to things in books and listening to you saying the words
- Finding things you ask for like 'Where is Big Teddy?'
- Games naming parts of the body like 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'
- Looking at photos and pictures together, especially photos of themselves, friends and families

Between the ages of one and two years, children will be learning to think and solve simple puzzles, to co-ordinate their body and hand movements, to listen to sounds more effectively, to imagine things and to concentrate for longer, to pretend, to explore and to be creative. This is also a time of rapid language development when children often start to put two single words together, so keep talking to them! They usually play happily alongside other children but are not yet able to share or take turns easily.

## Play tips

Between 2 and 4 years, your child might enjoy:

- Building with Duplo, Mega blocks, cereal packets, washing up liquid bottles and other scraps of junk
- Sticking, gluing, cutting using safety scissors
- Drawing, colouring and painting
- Cooking together
- Water play
- Making a scrap book together
- Playing in sand, water or making play dough with interesting things mixed in like glitter, dried lentils, vanilla essence, or food colouring
- Dressing up and simple role play like pretending to be a fairy or super hero
- Exploring being a baby – as if re-experiencing times that were not satisfying the first time round
- Playing in the park, looking for leaves, twigs, flowers or feathers outside, rough and tumble play, climbing
- Simple games with you like picture matching, magnetic fishing games
- Enjoying short stories with you

At this stage, your child is learning to think and solve problems, and is interested in the properties of things, where things come from and how they work. As a child gets older, play will help to develop concentration. This is also a time when children learn lots of new words, including new words for actions, as well as how to put sentences together.

Children may now be ready to play with others but will still need an adult to help sort out any difficulties.

## Toy tips

- Children can sometimes find a large selection of toys too overwhelming so you don't need to have all their toys available at all times – you might try changing a smaller selection of toys around once a week
- Children tend to love libraries and many local libraries stock toys, books and story tapes
- The British Standard Kite Mark or CE Mark indicate product safety
- Most books and toys will state the age of child they are intended for
- Playing together in a quiet room helps the child learn to concentrate and to listen to sounds more effectively
- Television can give a child a lot of entertainment but watch together so that you can talk about what you have seen, join in with songs and make up pretend games.