When someone dies it is very common for adults to assume a child or young person needs counselling or some professional intervention.

We understand how difficult it is to allow children to experience emotions without wanting to make it better for them in some way and when someone dies it can be extremely difficult to watch a child experience the natural feelings that come with grief.

In the early days following a death a child/young person really needs to know that those in their everyday support network such as their Teachers, Teaching Assistants and Pastoral Workers know about what has happened and acknowledge it for them.

This doesn’t need to be anything therapeutic, it is about letting them know that someone is there for them, if and when they may need it.

It may be helpful to have a conversation with the child/young person about how things in school can be made to feel more manageable, how they can take time out (appropriately!) if they need it and let them know who to go to. Discuss with them what their friends know and what they want them to know, help them find the words to tell others what has happened if they want to. Encourage them to communicate with family members about questions they may have at the moment and things they may appear confused about – help them to do this where you can. You don’t have to have all the answers! You can encourage and help them to find their own answers from those around them.

What has happened will be feeling very big for the child/young person. By rushing in to tell them they need counselling you may accidentally give them the feeling that this is so big they could not possibly cope with it without professional help. The child/young person really needs to know that those within their everyday support network can help them to cope with this - wherever possible.

When a child/ young person experiences a bereavement of any kind it can make the world feel less safe than it did before. You would naturally expect some increased levels of anxiety and emotions.

If it feels that the parents/carers would benefit from some advice on how to talk to their child about what has happened then a referral to us would be appropriate at this stage. We can provide support and advice to the parents/carers; however they must give consent for you to make the referral.

We know that children don’t process information in the same way we do as adults and it is very common for a child to show a high level of distress one minute but then want to know if dinner is ready or if they can go to their friends the next! Children and young people will continue to revisit the bereavement and their feelings about it. As time goes by their understanding will change and it will have a different meaning to them. Their grief will always be there to some degree and helping the child understand this may be just what they need.

If a young person has asked for support from Penhaligon’s Friends in the early days following a death then we would want to involve parents/carers wherever possible. We would ideally talk to parents/carers over the phone and we prefer to visit a child/young person together with them. If a young person does not want us to contact parents/carers then we would offer a one -off visit within school where we could explain who we are, what we may be able to offer and look to obtain parental consent for any further support we may offer.

We understand that many adults don’t always feel confident when talking to a child about such a sensitive subject but we believe that children and young people are best supported with their everyday emotions and worries by those around them. We are always happy to provide advice and guidance to parents/carers and professionals and to help you support the child with their bereavement needs. We may be able to offer additional staff training for your setting/agency.

If the bereavement was some time ago and there are ongoing concerns about the child/young person and how they are coping then this may be the time to make a referral to us. Again, the parents/carers must give consent for you to make the referral.

When we receive your referral we will call the parents/carers as soon as we can to introduce ourselves and talk through what has been happening for them and their child/children. In many cases we may simply offer telephone support to parents and carers to help them through some difficult times with their children, give them ideas, resources and more often than not – a listening ear and reassurance.

If we feel a visit to the family would be helpful then we would ensure the parents/carers speak to the children first to find out how they feel about us visiting them. If we agree to meet the family then this may be within the family home or they may choose to come to see us at our centre in Redruth. During an initial visit we would tell the family about Penhaligon’s Friends and find out what has been going on for them, encourage them to talk together about the bereavement and discuss what support may be appropriate from there.

If parents/carers do not want us to visit them at home then we may try to encourage them to meet with us, together with their child in school or a suitable venue. If this is not possible but the child/young person is specifically asking to meet us then we would arrange a one - off initial meeting with them in school and may invite a member of school staff to join us (particularly with younger children).

After an initial meeting with a family/young person we would call them to discuss the options of ongoing support discussed with them at our meeting. This gives them time to think about what they may like to engage in.

Support we may offer from an initial meeting are invitations to a Memory Day, Family Groups, Teenage Groups or where a child/ young person would benefit from speaking to someone on an individual basis we may offer them a number of sessions 1-1 with one of our Support Work Volunteers.

Memory Day – A one off opportunity for the family to come along and begin to make a memory box. They make a story book and a memory jar, have the opportunity to meet other children/young people their age, talk to a Doctor about why someone may have died, light a candle of remembrance and send a message on a balloon.

Family Group – A monthly drop in session for parents/carers and children of all ages. Tea, cake, chat and activities provided! We are currently running groups in Redruth & Liskeard.

Teenage Group – A monthly group for young people from year 7 up to age 18 years. Peer support, fun, food and some reflective activities and regular access to trained Penhaligon’s Friends volunteers. We are currently running groups in Newquay, Redruth, Launceston and St Austell.

One to One Support Work – Individual sessions between a child/young person and one of our trained, DBS checked Support Work Volunteers. These sessions may take place within school, our centre, or an alternative agreed setting for an agreed number of sessions.

We would usually then keep in touch with a family for as long as they would like us to and offer them open access to contacting us when they feel they need us until their child reaches age 18 years.