

# Talking to children when someone close is very ill



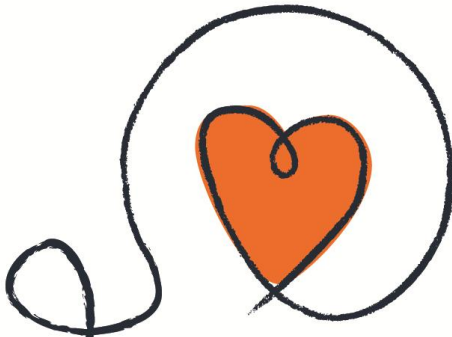
## **Content**

Advice on how to tell children when someone is ill



## Introduction

*Children will often sense when something is wrong within the family. If they are not told the truth in a way that they can understand, they can imagine things that are not true or are far worse than reality. If we try to protect children by not talking to them about what is happening we may set a trail of events that is hard to reverse. If children are not told they may:*



- Find out the truth from someone else
- Feel shut out by the rest of the family
- Overhear things or link experiences from their past and come up with the wrong conclusion and as a result misunderstand the situation
- Lose their trust in you to tell the truth.



**It is important to remember that:**

*Children have an amazing ability and capacity to deal with situations. We cannot prevent them from being upset but being truthful and honest about what is happening can relieve the anxiety of not knowing and misunderstanding.*

You, along with your family, friends and professionals involved with the children can support them by providing information and giving them the opportunity to share feelings by talking and participating in activities together.



**Advice for telling the children**

This can be a very hard thing to do. It is usually best for those closest to the children to break the news, however there is support available if you or those closest to the children feel unable to do so.

Keep the information simple and in a language they understand. It is important to use words that can be easily understood. Try to avoid linking illness and death with sleep, journeys and someone being good.

You may need to repeat explanations many times. Link explanations to things they may have noticed such as tiredness and spending more time in bed and give the information at their speed.



As things change keep the children informed but do not burden them with excessive detail.

Keep in control but do not be afraid to cry and show your feelings as this tells the children it is okay to do this.

Respond to any questions they may have honestly and simply.

Do not be afraid to say "I don't know" and correct any misconceptions they may have.

Ask them if they have any worries or how they are feeling. Do not push them but give yourself time to answer questions and share feelings as they arise.

Don't make promises you cannot keep.

Be aware they may act out their feelings; look out for changes in behaviour such as regression into bedwetting, clinging and suppression of feelings.

Some children are afraid that they or someone else close to them will become ill and die, or that in some way they are responsible for what is happening.

Reassure them that they are loved and that life will continue as normally as possible. They are likely to be concerned about such things as getting to and from school or social activities if their normal routine has been to depend on the sick person.

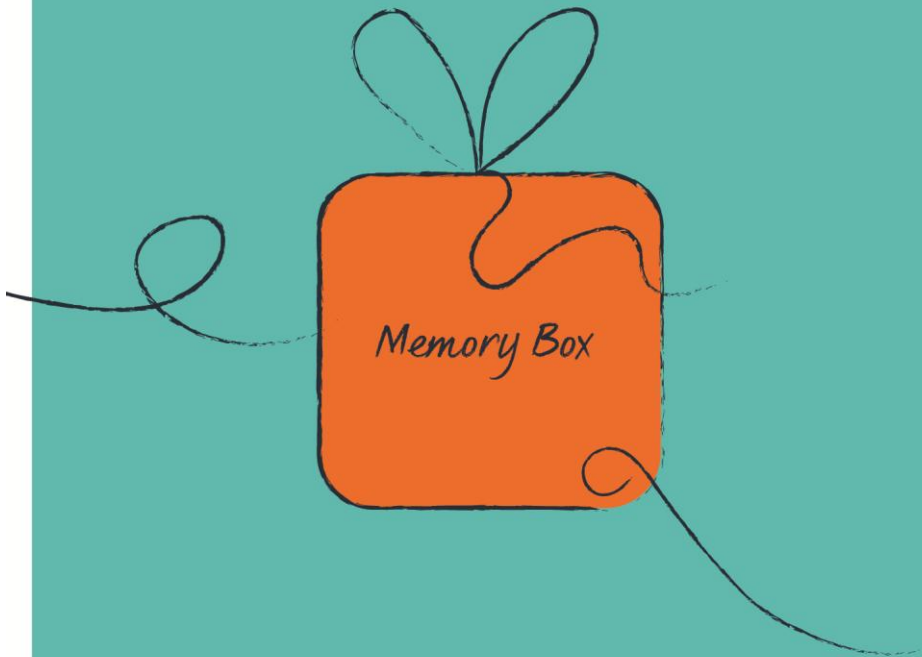
Keep to the child's routine so they have boundaries and are helped to feel "safe".

Tell people involved in caring for your child e.g. Nurseries or schools so they can support your child and you. St Catherine's can also offer support.

Use books or play to explain what is happening. Winston's Wish has a suggested reading list on their website that you might find useful. Please see the back of this leaflet for further information.



*Think about making Memory Boxes, Thought Boxes and creating special memories together. We can help you with these if you wish.*



Do not be surprised if children listen and then quickly want to resume their activities. This is quite normal and is termed “puddle hopping”. They will come back to the conversation another time.

Children will be upset and sadly there is nothing you can do to make that better for them.



## Support and help

**The following websites have useful information and books:**

**[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)**

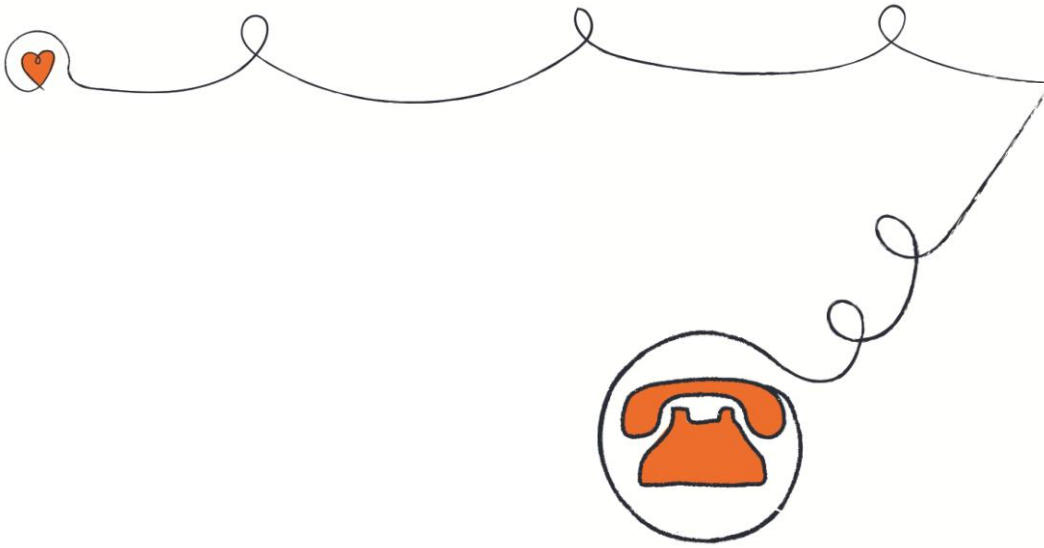
Find a suggested reading list under Supporting a Bereaved Child on the Winston's Wish website.

**[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)**

Useful information sheets can be found under Publications and then Information Sheets on the Child Bereavement UK website.

Links to both of the above can also be found here:

**[www.stch.org.uk/our-services/bereavement-support/helpful-organisations/](http://www.stch.org.uk/our-services/bereavement-support/helpful-organisations/)**

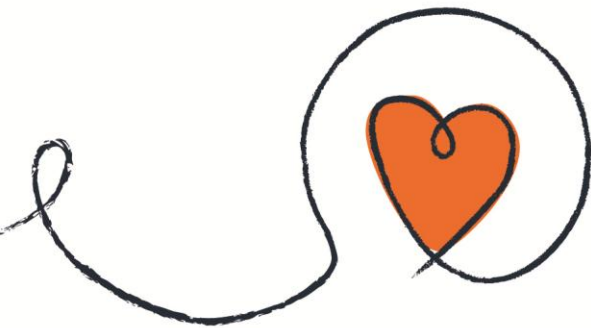


If you would like to talk this through, have any questions or would like any further support and help in talking to your children, please contact the Patient and Family Support Team at St Catherine's Hospice on **01293 447343**.

If you find the phone unattended, please leave a short message on the confidential voicemail facility and your call will be returned as soon as possible. You can also email us at [PFST@stch.org.uk](mailto:PFST@stch.org.uk)

Further copies of this leaflet are available by calling the Patient and Family Support Team on 01293 447343.

If it would be helpful to have this leaflet in another format or language please call the main hospice switchboard on 01293 447333.



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