

A Guide to the Rainbows Bereavement Programmes for Children - PRIMARY



Children grow up in a world assuming that their family will always stay the same.

When there is a death in a family, everyone is affected. Death can have an impact on children.

People often assume that children are not as deeply affected as adults by death. It is generally considered that children bounce back.

The very foundation of this programme is to accept each child as a grieving person, no matter what their age. Frequently, children do not have the words or understanding to talk about what is happening or how they feel.

Children grieve and can experience grief in a very different way to adults. They can be fine one minute and then suddenly, have moments of intense sadness and upset, or outbursts of anger that can be worrying for a parent. This is all very normal.

Participating in a support group with others who are experiencing the same emotions and feelings can be very helpful – children in particular, can think that they are the *only one* or the *only family*.

An average of 3,000 children attend a Rainbows programme every year.

What Rainbows offers:

- Support in a safe place where children can share their experience of loss through a death with others in a similar situation -“I’m not the only one”
- Support for children to be able to name and share their feelings
- Support to help rebuild self-esteem, trust, and self confidence
- Support children to begin to adjust to the changes in their life in a positive and healthy way

What Rainbows cannot offer:

- Professional counselling or therapy
- Does not give advice or attempt to solve problems
- Does not give opinions, pass comment, make judgements, take sides or criticise
- Does not give reports, take notes
- The Rainbows programme cannot be a first response for children impacted by death as a result of suicide - a professional support is needed – group support can only be accessed when that professional support has taken place

Note: It is not permitted that any child attending another service can attend the Rainbows programme at the same time. Attending two services at the same time can hinder the effectiveness of each service.

Rainbows Bereavement programmes:

The programme supports children to be able to share their story about the person that has died. They are supported to talk about what the person meant to them and the part they played in their lives.

Most of all, the programme seeks to help children build their memories of the person, things they did together, times they shared, laughed together and special times they may have had. This is very much part of being supported to adjust to the death of someone they care about.

Bereavement Groups:

- Groups are formed with other children of a similar age
- There are usually 4 – 8 in a group
- If only two children are present in any session, the session will be cancelled for that week
- Siblings are not in the same group, siblings of a similar age may be in the same group but only in very specific circumstances

The boundary of the group:

- Children are encouraged to share at home what they themselves have talked about, and what the Facilitators have said to them, but not to talk about others by name or share what they have said.
- If a child indicates, in the course of the programme, that they are at risk, being harmed, harming themselves or others, Child Protection procedures, as laid down under Children First Guidelines (Department of Health and Children, 2017) will be followed.

Facilitators:

- These are trained volunteers who have completed a recruitment process and undertaken a 4 day training, in order to facilitate the groups each week (they are not trained counsellors or therapists).
- There are two Facilitators with each group.

The Rainbows programmes:

- A nine week programme
- Each session lasts for one hour
- Children are signed in at the start of the programme and then signed out at the end when collected
- Children can only be collected by one of the people named by parents in the enrolment form as eligible to collect their child
- The programme is available at three levels at Primary school age – Lower Primary (must be 7 and/or in 1st class), Middle Primary age groups, Senior Primary age groups.
- The programme is available for teenagers (Rainbows Bereavement Level 4) – groups are formed with no group member being more than two years older than the youngest group member.

The programme is delivered using a variety of resources:

- Programme activity Journal
- Story
- Scenarios
- Discussion Questions
- Drawing, writing
- Movement activities
- Relaxation

Key themes/topics in the programme:

Feelings: Children very often do not have the words or understanding to name or recognise their feelings, particularly at a time of loss. Being supported through the programme to recognise, name and express feelings in a safe space can reduce possible confusion, worries and isolation. Recognising that others in a similar situation have the same feelings can be very comforting to a child.

Family: Children can think following a death, that they are no longer a family. Through the programme, children are guided to understand that they are still part of a family even though there has been a death in the family.

Change: Children assume that their family will always stay the same. When a death happens in a family, everyone is affected. The change following a death can be overwhelming for children. Through the programme, children are supported as they begin to make sense of what has happened. Talking about the person and the way they feel about the death can help children to cope – keeping things bottled up is not helpful for children.

Anger: Anger is a normal, healthy emotion. It is very common that children can be angry and frustrated, not understanding what has happened. The programme focuses on the anger that they may be experiencing and how they may express anger in a safe and healthy way.

Difficult feelings: Children regularly blame themselves and feel guilty when someone dies. Feelings of confusion, worry, fear, loneliness or sadness can be common at times.

Coping and adjusting: We can't prevent children from experiencing sadness when someone they love dies. Simple coping techniques are introduced in the programme to build confidence in children and support them to adapt and adjust to a world without the person who has died.

Note: It is important to remember that all children are different. Children within the same family will respond differently.

Details Parents need to know:

The Rainbows programme is a free service funded by Tusla.

Every programme has a Coordinator who manages the programme and the groups. It is important that it is the Coordinator you contact with any questions before or during the programme.

- A Rainbows Bereavement Enrolment Form is required to be completed for every child attending the programme. Forms are available at the programme centre or by making contact with the Coordinator.
- It is important to understand that the Rainbows programme may not meet the needs of all children. Some bereavements of a more traumatic nature will need a more professional support. We ask that you consult in advance of enrolment by emailing support@rainbowsireland.ie or phone in confidence **087 3510898**.
- Children whose bereavement is a result of suicide need professional support before attending the group support of the Rainbows programme.
- It is only natural to want to ask your child lots of questions after the Rainbows sessions. It is probably best not to ask questions immediately after the session but leave it until a more suitable, quiet time to check how they are getting on.
- It is important to be aware that group support is not always suitable for everyone. It can happen at times that a child may leave the programme. This will be discussed with parents if this situation arises and every effort will be made to signpost you to another support service.
- Children are welcome to return to the programme following a gap of 9 months.
- It is very common that children attend the programme again, particularly when they get older.
- If the number in the group is below three at any given time, the group is postponed as two group members is not peer group support.

Programme materials:

The programme materials are kept in a secure place by the Coordinators for the duration of the programme. No one has access to the materials.

The programme material is not a diagnostic or analytical resource to form any analysis on a child's coping.

The programme material is designed for the group context only.

When taken out of that safe context, the programme material can or may be interpreted in a way that was not intended.

For this reason the programme materials are shredded following completion of the programme.

Feedback:

The Rainbows programme provides a space for children to be supported to begin to understand, talk about and adapt to the changes in their life.

The support provided by Facilitators in the group is not a diagnostic or therapeutic process.

The policy of Rainbows Ireland is not to give specific feedback on any group member taking part in the programme.

As parents and guardians, it is generally you that will observe and notice any positive impact that the programme may have had on your child, on a day to day basis and over time.

Parents generally identify outcomes such as: reduced conflict between siblings, improved sleeping patterns, improved communication with parents, feelings of being more adjusted to the situation, more able and willing to talk to parents, smiling a bit more, being more relaxed.

Introducing the programme to your child:

- It is important to talk to your child about attending the programme in advance and that they agree to take part
- It would help to give your child an outline of the programme, including the number of weeks, how the groups are formed and some of the topics that are covered
- It can be helpful to highlight also that they will meet others in a similar situation to themselves
- Reassure your child that there is no pressure put on them to have to talk in the group

What might help? (Take it in stages)

- Have you ever heard of Rainbows?
- If a yes response ask "What do know about Rainbows?"

- If no response – “I am going to tell you a little about Rainbows - Rainbows is a group where children whohave a chance to come together.”
- Child may ask “What do you do there”? - “Well it runs for about an hour and goes on for 9 weeks. There will be two adults called Facilitators who will help you to talk about x who has died. You will have a journal where you can write or draw. There will be stories and games also to help you understand what has happened or is happening. You do not have to speak or talk if you do not want to. You will meet other children where someone they love has died.”
- There will be about 5 or 6 children around your age and two grown-ups.

What some parents say about their child after the programme:

In general, over the years, parents say that they notice that their child, on completion of the programme and in the weeks and months ahead is:

- More at ease
- Not as quick to be frustrated or angry
- Less anxious/worried
- Look forward to things more
- More able to open up
- Less stressed in the family

We deeply acknowledge the large number of parents and guardians who give their child the opportunity to have a space to talk openly, without fear of upsetting other family members.

Being in a group process, with others of a shared experience of loss, can begin to support children to come to terms and adjust in a positive way to the change in their family life.