

Understanding the Invisible Suitcase of Grief

A guide for parents, carers, and teachers

What is the Invisible Suitcase?

- Every grieving child carries an “invisible suitcase” with them everywhere they go.
- Inside are their feelings, questions, memories, and worries about the person who died.
- You can’t always see the suitcase, but it can affect how they behave, learn, and interact with others.
- At times, the suitcase feels light and manageable; at other times, it feels very heavy and overwhelming.

Think of it like this: The suitcase is part of them now. We cannot take it away, but we can help them open it safely, sort through what’s inside, and carry it with more ease.

What Might Be Inside the Suitcase?

- Big feelings: sadness, anger, fear, guilt, loneliness.
- Unanswered questions: “Why did they die?” “Is it my fault?” “Will someone else die too?”
- Memories: treasured happy moments, or painful last experiences.
- Worries: about safety, family stability, or being different from peers.
- Mixed emotions: moments of laughter and joy, even while grieving.

Children may not have the words to explain what’s inside, so it often shows through their behaviour, play, and body language.

How Does the Suitcase Show Up in Daily Life?

- A child may seem fine one minute, then suddenly upset.
- They might struggle to concentrate in school or seem “daydreamy.”
- Anger or tantrums can be a way of releasing heavy emotions.
- They might replay themes of death, loss, or separation in their play, drawings, or stories.
- Sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, or clinginess may appear.
- Certain reminders (birthdays, holidays, smells, songs) may suddenly make the suitcase feel heavy again.

How Adults Can Help

1. Notice the suitcase
 - Don't assume a child is "over it" if they seem happy. Grief is still there, just hidden.
2. Help them unpack safely
 - Encourage sharing through words, art, play, or storytelling.
 - Let them decide how much to "take out" at a time.
3. Keep life steady
 - Routines and structure give children a sense of safety when everything else feels uncertain.
4. Reassure with honesty
 - Answer questions clearly, without confusing euphemisms ("gone to sleep" can create fear of bedtime).
5. Build coping tools
 - Teach ways to calm down (deep breaths, journaling, physical activity).
 - Model healthy coping by showing that it's okay to be sad and okay to laugh.
6. Pack positive things into the suitcase
 - Share memories, photos, or rituals to keep the loved one's memory alive.
 - Highlight the child's strengths and resilience.

Key Messages for Parents, Carers, and Teachers

- The suitcase is always there – sometimes light, sometimes heavy.
- Children's grief doesn't go away, but it changes over time as they grow.
- Big events (graduations, birthdays, weddings) may bring the suitcase back into focus.
- You can't carry the suitcase for them, but you can walk beside them and make sure they never carry it alone.
- Small, everyday acts of care (listening, patience, encouragement) lighten the load more than grand gestures.

Final Thought

The Invisible Suitcase reminds us that children's grief is often hidden from view. By understanding, listening, and walking alongside them, we help them carry it with strength and hope. With the right support, the suitcase becomes not just a burden, but also a container of love, memory, and resilience.