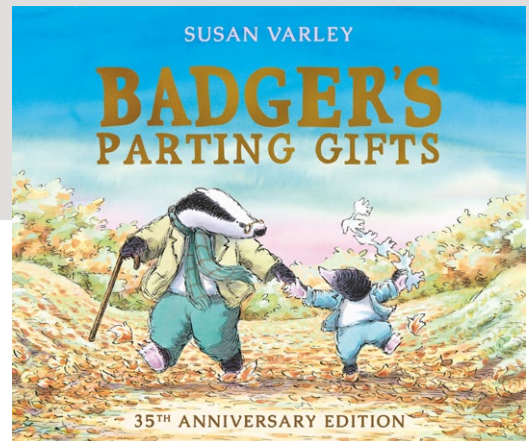


## *Badger's Parting Gifts* By Susan Varley

Talking With and Supporting Bereaved Children



### Sharing *Badger's Parting Gifts* with children

*Badger's Parting Gifts* provides young children with a means to understand grief, encouraging open conversation and sharing emotions. Bereaved children value and need the time that a trusted adult can give, and this book helps by encouraging conversations and the expression of feelings. Before reading this book to a child, it is suggested that you read it to prepare yourself for any pages that might be particularly difficult, and to anticipate any questions the child may ask and how you will respond.

After Badger's death, his friends describe their emotions and come together to talk about Badger, each of them recalling something special that he taught them. As Badger's friends share their feelings, there is an opportunity for children to recognise and share their own experiences. Talking about special times can help children build up memories.

Badger's friends continue to gather to think and talk about him, reflecting the importance of ongoing communication and conversation. His 'parting gifts' enable children to consider their connection to people in their lives and emphasise that, while the person who has died is not physically around, they remain an important part of the child's life.



Badger was dependable, reliable, and always ready to lend a helping paw. He was also very old, and he knew almost everything. Badger was so old that he knew he must soon die.

### How should I talk with children about death and dying?

Talking to children about death and dying is incredibly difficult and can feel just too hard to do. This is compounded by an adult's natural instinct to protect children from the tough things in life, but whether a child has faced the death of someone important or they are asking natural questions about death, children need information and explanations. These need to be honest, simple, and in language the child understands. With support, children can deal with the truth, no matter how difficult or traumatic; what they find hard are the untruths.

In talking with children, it is important to consider their developmental age and what they may understand about death and dying.

It is now well recognised that very young children, including babies, do experience grief, they just show it differently. When someone familiar dies, the overriding response in the under 5s is a sense of loss. Being too young to understand the cause, and lacking the vocabulary, they express their distress through their behaviour. Even a very young baby, with clearly no concept of what being dead means, will pick up on an emotionally charged atmosphere and will probably have a reaction of some sort. When it is a parent or main carer who has died, this loss will be particularly acutely felt through the inevitable changes such as an upset routine, a different carer, and unfamiliar surroundings with strange sounds and smells. A toddler is capable of taking in much more than most adults realise and will be very aware that something significant has happened. Under 5s can, and often do, react strongly to their own grief, but also to the grief of significant adults involved in their day-to-day care.

Young children are interested in the idea of death in birds and animals. They can begin to use the word 'dead' and develop an awareness that this is different to being alive. Children of this age do not understand abstract concepts like 'forever' and cannot grasp that death is permanent. Their limited understanding may lead to an apparent lack of reaction when told about a death, and they may ask many questions about where the person who has died is and when that person will come back. Children at this age expect the person to return. Young children tend to interpret what they are told in a very literal and concrete way; therefore it is important to avoid offering explanations of death such as 'lost', 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep' that may cause misunderstandings and confusion.



'Fox broke the sad news that Badger was dead and read Badger's note to them. It said simply, "Gone down the Long Tunnel. Bye Bye, Badger."

Between the ages of 5 and 7 years, children gradually begin to develop an understanding that death is permanent and irreversible and that the person who has died will not return. Children who have been bereaved when they were younger will have to re-process what has happened as they develop awareness of the finality of death.

Children's imagination and 'magical thinking' at this age can mean that some children may believe that their thoughts or actions caused the death, and they can feel guilty. Not being given sufficient information in age-appropriate language can lead them to 'make-up' and fill in the gaps in their knowledge. Children increasingly become aware that death is an inevitable part of life that happens to all living things. As a result, they can become anxious about their own, and others', health and safety.

When talking to children of any age it is important to use simple words appropriate for the child's age and understanding. It is important to use the real words such as 'dead' and 'died'. Euphemisms including 'lost' or 'gone to sleep' may seem kinder, but for a child can cause confusion.

Only give as much information as a child wants. This is usually indicated by them asking a question – if they have asked the question it usually means that they are ready to hear, or need to hear, the answer.

Try to answer only the question asked and avoid giving extra detail. There is a fine line between being honest and overloading a child with information they do not want. Information can always be added later if needed.

If faced with a question you find difficult or are not sure how to answer, it can be helpful to ask the child what they think. This will give you an indication of how much the child already knows and understands.

### How do children respond to death?



“Badger had always been there when anyone needed him. The animals all wondered what they would do now that he was gone. Badger had told them not to be unhappy, but it was hard not to be.”

As concerned adults, we would like to be reassured that children are too young to feel the deep sadness

and despair that grief can bring. Sadly, this is not the case. Children and young people grieve just as deeply as adults, but they show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by copying the responses of the adults around them. They rely on adults to provide them with what they need to support them in their grief.

Children have a limited ability to put feelings, thoughts and memories into words and tend to ‘act out’ with behaviours rather than express themselves verbally. They will gradually gain the language of feelings by listening to words that you use. Showing your grief will encourage them to express theirs. Their behaviour is your guide to how they are feeling. This is as true for a very young child as it is for a teenager.

Children are naturally good at dipping in and out of their grief. They can be intensely sad one minute, then suddenly switch to playing happily the next. This apparent lack of sadness may lead adults to believe children are unaffected. However, this ‘puddle-jumping’ in and out of grief behaviour is a type of inbuilt safety mechanism that stops them from being overwhelmed by powerful feelings.

The difference between adult and child grief is sometimes illustrated by the following: a child jumps in and out of puddles of grief, but an adult is deep in a river, being swept along with the current, finding it very difficult to get out.

In addition to their age and understanding, children’s response will also depend on the relationship they had with the person who has died. The loss of a parent or main carer can have a devastating effect on a child. Feelings of insecurity are common, and children will be concerned as to who will look after them now. They can also fear that their other parent is going to die and will need lots of reassurance around this. Following such a loss, children may feel it is their duty to take on the responsibilities of the

parent who has died, even when nobody expects this of them.

When a child dies within a family, their brothers or sisters may feel left out as so many emotions are understandably focused on the child who has died. Siblings can have conflicting emotions of deep sadness, mixed in with relief that adults might now have some time and energy for them.

A grandparent who was very involved with a child's care will be probably be missed more than one who was seen less frequently, but it is important not to make assumptions. A death that appears to be not very significant can trigger feelings around other losses.

How someone died will affect a child's response. A sudden death allows no time to prepare for what happens, no opportunity to say goodbye. We might assume that an expected death is easier to bear than a sudden one. This is not always the case, they are just different. Watching someone becoming more and more unwell can be very distressing. For children and young people, the death of someone who has been ill for some time can still be a huge shock, especially if they have not been kept aware of the seriousness of the situation.

### What helps grieving children?

Every child is unique and will cope with the death of someone important in their own way.

However, children and families tell us that grieving is exhausting for everybody, child or adult, but is eased if everyone can do it together and find their way through as best they all can. You can do a huge amount by carrying on as much as you can with the usual routines of home, school, time with friends, etc.

Children need to know from parents and carers that they are still loved, that they will continue to be looked after and that they will be involved in any decisions that affect them. When their world has fallen apart, the familiar routine of school can feel safe and secure and is a helpful reminder for a child that not everything has changed. Children can feel very out of control and scared when experiencing the death of someone important and may respond with challenging behaviour. Try to continue with normal standards of behaviour but 'normality with compassion' is a good yardstick to use. Try to change the rules and boundaries as little as possible, although this may feel very difficult to do when you are exhausted emotionally and physically.

### What can help children to express their feelings?

Children of all ages do not like to feel under pressure to express powerful emotions; it can feel too painful or just not the right time. Talking is only one way of doing this and for many young people, it is not what they find easy to do. There are alternatives. Very young children use play to help them understand what has happened. With adult help, model figures or glove puppets can be used to re-enact scenes, such as at a hospital. They may play at being dead. Adults watching might find this disturbing but it is how very young children make sense of the world around them. Messy painting or drawing can help a child who is too young to have acquired the vocabulary of loss and grief.

A shared activity such as walking the dog or playing a game takes off the pressure and therefore can be a time when a child will start to share thoughts and feelings. Developing a memory box together is another idea to encourage communication. Working through an activity or workbook together can be another good way to gently open the door on the subject.

Share your feelings with your child; children learn to grieve from the adults around them. If parents are open and expressive, their children are likely to be so too. On the other hand, they will learn to close down and bottle up emotions if adults are distant and always attempting to keep their feelings under control.

Anger forms a large part of the grieving process and children of all ages will express it in various ways. Giving the message that it is understandable for them to be angry is what they need to hear. However, they also need to know that it is not acceptable to hurt themselves or anyone else. Discuss with them safe ways to release anger.

Sometimes it can help for the child to talk to someone who is not emotionally involved. This could be a family friend, or other adult, who is prepared to give some time and listen properly. Teachers can play an important role here. In the early days after a death bereaved children tell us this support is vital, but some will want to access outside support. Child Bereavement UK can signpost you to support in your area.

Children will continue to grieve for life, but with the support of the adults around them most children will learn to adjust.

### Questions children may ask when reading this book with you

Children have active minds and vivid imaginations. Stories can help children identify with characters and explore themes in a safe and supportive way. *Badger's Parting Gifts* provides a good introduction to death and dying for the youngest of children. The characters are animals, providing an easily relatable situation, and the language in the story does not shy away from terms such as 'death' or 'dying'. Sharing books like *Badger's Parting Gifts*

can provide a base for open conversation, and can help to provide comfort to grieving children.

Child Bereavement UK has used *Badger's Parting Gifts* in its bereavement support work with children over the past 10 years. Below are some questions that children may ask, and some ways that you may like to consider responding. There are no set responses or 'right ways' of responding. If you are unsure what the question means or how to respond, asking the child 'What do you think?' can be a helpful way to understand what the child is thinking.

### "Do people only die when they get old?"



The story can be challenging for children when they know someone young who has died. In the story, Badger is very old and knows he must soon die. It can be helpful to reassure children that most people live a long life and die when they are old.

### "What happens when someone dies?"

When Badger dies, we see him falling asleep, then dreaming he is running down a long tunnel. This may raise questions at many levels that have very different meanings, from the physical to spiritual and faith beliefs. In terms of responses about physical changes it may be helpful to say something like:

*'When somebody dies their body stops working. A dead body does not breathe because their lungs are no longer working and the heart has stopped. A dead body cannot move, it will be very quiet and still. A dead body cannot feel anything so there will be no pain.'*



Because a young child can find it hard to grasp the difference between being dead and being alive, they may need to be reassured with words along the lines of the following:

*'Because their body has stopped working, dead people do not need anything to eat or to drink and they cannot feel the cold. Dead people stay dead for ever; much as we might like them to, they cannot come back to life.'*

In terms of questions related to faith: it is important to be led by the family's culture and beliefs. It can be helpful to ask the child what they think.

### **"Does everyone feel sad when someone dies?"**

The animals feel sad when Badger dies, and we see that Mole in particular is affected. It is important to reassure children that when someone dies this affects everyone in different ways and it is OK to feel

different things. *"When someone dies we feel lots of different emotions or sometimes nothing at all: some people feel confused, some feel angry, some feel scared, some feel sad; I wonder how you feel/ think you would feel?"*



### **"Does everyone cry when they are sad?"**

It is important to reassure children that everyone is different. *"When you are sad inside and it hurts you may cry, it is natural; some people cry a lot, some people cry just a little, some people cry in secret, some people don't cry at all."*

In the story, we see Mole grieving, but we don't see how the other animals react. Ask children how they imagine the other animals might be feeling or reacting, to encourage an exploration into the different feelings that people may have when they are bereaved.



## “Are people sad forever?”

The animals come to feel less sad as time goes on, and learn to remember Badger with a smile through supporting each other. It is important to reassure children that things can change. *“Most people who have had someone die have good and bad days. It is OK to cry and it is OK to have fun too. You don’t have to be sad all the time and having fun doesn’t mean that you love that special person any less.”*

The rest of the book describes how Badger’s friends remember what Badger taught them. Grief is not about forgetting the person who died but finding ways of remembering them, what they meant to us and what they taught us. Children may need the support to do this.

### You could:

- Ask them what their special person taught them
- Use photos to talk about special times
- Create a memory box
- Create a memory book - <https://childbereavementuk.org/product/remembering/>

As children grow it will be important that conversations continue to build up and maintain these memories.

For more information and support, visit [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org) or call our helpline on 0800 02 888 40

For more about Badger’s Parting Gifts, visit [www.andersenpress.co.uk](http://www.andersenpress.co.uk)

