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Guide *for* Parents *and* Professionals

When a child loses a loved one such as a parent, it is essential that they are helped to cope with the enormity of the feelings they are experiencing. This help can be offered by the remaining parent or by a professional working closely with the child. Honest and sensitive answers to a child's questions and reassurance that someone is there for them will begin the process of helping the child to express and process their experiences.

In *A Sky of Diamonds*, Mia's mother dies unexpectedly when she is at work. We see Mia talk about the day that her mother dies, as though the colour has been sucked from her world, leaving only dreary grey colours – this reflects the bleakness and empty feelings that Mia experiences inside.

Although the majority of school-aged children can understand the finality of death, younger children may believe that, in some way, the loved one is going to come back – particularly if they hear comments that their loved one is asleep or has gone to a lovely place. Children need an adult to sensitively explain the finality of death. In this story Mia's father helps her to understand that her mother's heart stopped and that when a person's body no longer works, they cannot stay alive.

It is helpful for children to understand what they are experiencing and why. Mia's father uses the word 'grief' but also helps her to understand the varying emotions she is experiencing by picturing a rollercoaster, to help explain and offer hope that over time, the painful feelings will lessen. Here we see Mia's father tell her that he too is grieving. Such acknowledgement can help children to understand that they are not alone with their emotions and that it is OK to cry and talk about their difficult feelings.

There may be times in a child's grieving when they present as though life has not really changed for them and they appear happy and full of energy for their usual interests. However, this does not mean that they are unaffected by their loss, as they may in fact be struggling with how to express it. Young children find it more difficult to express their feelings verbally and will display their grief through their behaviour, as seen in Mia's angry outbursts, her problems sleeping and her withdrawal from her feelings like the 'ice queen' in her books. Children need to be free to express their emotions, however these may present. Mia's father accepts that she needs to be angry and helps her to find safe ways to do this, such as creating large pieces

of artwork, throwing ice shapes in the garden and using sheets of newspaper which are held up so that she can punch through them.

Often bereaved children have not had the opportunity to say goodbye, or do not feel that they said goodbye in the way that they would have wanted. Because Mia lost her mother unexpectedly, she worries that perhaps she caused the death in some way. Not only does this lead to Mia feeling guilty, but she also worries that the same, or a similar event leading to death, will happen to her father. These are common concerns for children after the loss of an important figure in their lives and they will need reassurance that they are not in fact to blame. Not being able to say goodbye can be extremely difficult for children to deal with, as their unsaid words remain locked inside. Children who have experienced a loss in this way need an adult to acknowledge how difficult not being able to say goodbye is. Mia's father helps her to write a letter to her mother as a way for both of them to say goodbye, also making possible a discussion about what they might do if they could have one more day with their loved one.

In *A Sky of Diamonds*, Mia's father suggests that they go on a 'memory journey'. Many experts in the field of bereavement agree that one of the ways of helping a child is to keep their memories of their loved one alive, so that the child feels less abandoned

and alone. Mia's father sets aside time so that he and Mia can think about their memories and store special items such as photos, memorabilia and cards in a box that Mia can look at when she needs to. In this way the child is helped to understand that even though the loved one has gone, the memories cannot be taken away.

Mia, like many children, asks her father questions about the death of her mother, to help her understand what has happened. One of her questions is written on a stone and thrown out to sea to release angry feelings. Writing thoughts down also encourages further discussions about what has happened. In response to the question 'Where have you gone?', Mia's father is honest with Mia, telling her that no one truly knows where a lost one has gone and that any answer other than this is dependent on an individual's personal belief system. By suggesting that there are not always clear answers to questions, Mia's father provides her with an opportunity to find her own answers. In this way, Mia is allowed to grow and develop her own resources – resources that will serve as sources of comfort for her, not only in dealing with the loss of her mother, but in living a future that is full and meaningful.



Hello, I am Mia and this is me.

I can remember the day my mum died, every single second of it.

Dad collected me from school early but I didn't run out as usual because his face looked different: sad, older and a bit scared. We went to our favourite spot on the seafront where in windy weather the waves splash over the top of our heads, making us giggle and scream. Dad spoke slowly and his voice sounded funny.

He said Mum had been hurt in an accident at work and even though her body had tried really hard to keep working, her heart had stopped and she had died.

I couldn't speak and my head *swirled.*

It felt as though in that second, everything had changed forever.

I now call that day the 'colour sucker day' because it was as though the colour had been sucked up by a giant vacuum cleaner. Everything was black and white or a dreary grey colour in between.