



# Rainbows Ireland

Group support  
programme for  
children and  
young people  
following  
bereavement,  
parental  
separation  
or divorce.

**TÚSLA**

An Ghníomhaireachta um  
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach  
Child and Family Agency

**WHAT WORKS**  
SHARING KNOWLEDGE  
Improving Children's Futures

## **What is Rainbows?**

**Rainbows is a national service providing group support for children and young people throughout Ireland experiencing significant change following bereavement, parental separation and divorce.**

The programmes are available in registered Rainbows programme centres throughout the country - schools, Family Resource centres, Youth projects, Family centres, School Completion Programmes among others.

The programme consists of a nine week programme. Separate groups are formed for bereavement and separation/divorce. A minimum of four to eight group members are in each group.

**It is a free service.**

**“When we connect with a child/young person, we have the power to change that child’s/ young person’s life.”**

Dr Karen Triesman

## How Rainbows can help?

- Gives children and young people an opportunity to explore and talk about their shared experiences of loss following bereavement, parental separation or divorce
- Supports children and young people to put words on their feelings as they begin to make sense of the changes and loss in their lives - children and young people often avoid their feelings, push them away or cover them up
- Allows a shared experience/identification with other's feelings in a similar situation - "I'm not the only one"
- Builds a place of trust that frees a child/young person to feel safe to talk and share feelings, concerns, hurts, pain, struggles - children and young people often try and protect their parents from their real feelings
- Provides a safe and trusted space of deep listening - a space of total acknowledgement, validation, affirmation and acceptance of feelings
  - Acknowledgement - being **heard**
  - Positive Affirmation - being **believed**
  - Validation - what a child says **matters** and is **accepted**
- Provides support to begin to understand why they feel they way do
- Fosters the rebuilding of self-esteem, trust, confidence and resilience
- Contributes to a process of adapting and adjusting following significant change and loss as a result of a bereavement, parental separation and divorce.

## What Rainbows cannot offer

- Professional Counselling or therapy
- Advice or solve problems
- Opinions etc
- Reports or notes
- Analysis or diagnosis

**Note:** A child or young person cannot attend another service while attending the Rainbows programme. Attending two services at the same time can hinder the effectiveness of each service

## Groups

- Groups are formed with others of a similar age
- Groups are separate for different losses, i.e. separate groups for bereavement and separate groups for separation and divorce
- There are 4 – 8 members in a group
- Siblings are not in the same group, except in very specific limited circumstances

## The boundary of the group

- Group members are encouraged to share with parents or guardians what they themselves have talked about and what the Facilitators have said to them, but not talk to about others by name or 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

- Are trained volunteers who have completed a recruitment process and undertaken 4 days of 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
- 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 Level 4) in both Separation and Bereavement – groups are formed with no group member **more than** two years older than the youngest member

## The programme is delivered using a variety of resources

- Programme activity journal for each group member
- Movement activities
- Story
- Scenarios
- Discussion Questions
- Drawing, writing
- Relaxation activities

**“Children and young people do best when they feel heard, understood, and when what they say matters and is accepted.”**

# **Key themes 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 and change. Being supported through the programme to recognise, name and express feelings in a safe space can reduce possible confusion, worries or isolation. Recognising that others in a similar situation have the same feelings can be very comforting to a child.

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## **Family**

Children can think following a death, parental separation or divorce 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 their family may have changed.

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## **Change**

Children assume that their family will always stay the same. When something significant happens in a family, everyone is affected. The change following a death, divorce and separation can be overwhelming for children. Through the programme, children are supported to begin to make sense of what has happened and the changes that have occurred.

## 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.

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## Difficult feelings

Children regularly blame themselves and feel guilty when someone dies or when parents separate. Feelings of confusion, worries, fears, loneliness, sadness can be common at times. These feelings are explored and supported through the programme.

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## Coping and adjusting

Simple coping techniques are introduced in the programme to help confidence and self esteem and to foster a process of coping, adjusting and adapting to what has happened in their lives.

**Note:** It is important to remember that all children and young people experience significant change and loss in different ways. Children and young people within the same family often respond in different ways.

## **Separation Programme:**

Separation changes the family structure and impacts on the family life of children and young people. The Rainbows group support programme reaches out to those children and young people who may find their family change a struggle. Group members are supported to give their feelings a voice and through the nine weeks of the programme those voices are heard, what they say matters and feeling are acknowledged and validated. The programme focuses on fostering and building a positive and healthy adjustment for children and young people.

## **Bereavement programme:**

When a bereavement happens in a family, everyone in the family can be affected in different ways.

The programme supports children and young people 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 and young people to build their memories of the person, things they did together, times they spent together, times they laughed together and other special times they shared together. This is very much part of being supported to adjust to the death of someone they care about. Young people also need to be supported if they have regrets about things they may have said or not said and those memories may be troubling.

## **Where are the Rainbows programmes?**

Details of the programme centres are available on [www.rainbowsireland.ie](http://www.rainbowsireland.ie)

Parents/Guardians can enquire at any public centre to enrol a child or young person in a programme. The programmes run at different times during the year, mainly in the weeks before and after Christmas. Some centres are in a position to run the programmes throughout the year, excluding the months of Summer.

Please be aware that availability of the programme is dependent on the enrolment of sufficient numbers to form the groups of a similar age and loss.

Schools generally enrol pupils from their own school population only.

There are a limited number of schools that take applications from their local area.  
(See website – school centres)

## **Is the Rainbows programme suitable for the needs of children and young people?**

The Rainbows programme **cannot meet the needs** of all change experiences or losses. There are some children and young people who may have more complex needs or more traumatic life experiences that Rainbows cannot support. Rainbows makes every effort to signpost to more appropriate levels of supports.

**Please note:** Bereavement that is a result of suicide needs professional support before attending the group support of the Rainbows programme.

It can happen that a child or young person may start the programme but may also leave the group during the programme as the programme may not be meeting their needs at this particular time.

If any parent/guardian who is considering the Rainbows programme, has a particular concern about the suitability of the programme for their son or daughter - Please email **[support@rainbowsireland.ie](mailto:support@rainbowsireland.ie)** or call **087 351 0898** to discuss in advance and make an informed decision about enrolling your son/daughter in the programme.

## **What some parents say about their son or daughter after the programme**

In general, over the years, that they notice on completion of the programme and in the weeks and months following, that their son/daughter are:

- More at ease
- Smiling more
- Better able to talk to their parents
- More confident
- Not as quick to be frustrated or angry
- Less anxious/worried
- Look forward to things more
- More able to talk about how they feel
- Less stress in the family

## **Group members have said**

- “I am not the only one”
- “We are not the only family”
- “I can walk faster now”
- “It made me remember building the snowman with my Dad ”
- “Helped me get the bad feelings out”
- “I can talk about Grandad now”
- “I squeeze my eyes tight shut and remember my Mam”

**“One of the greatest gifts we can give children and young people is helping them to believe in themselves and their ability to adjust to significant change and loss in their lives.”**

**“When children and young people can talk about difficult feelings, they can become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary.”**

Fred Rogers

**“Grief, loss and significant change can cause children and teenagers to feel their life is out of control.”**

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