

Bereavement Policy 2020-2021

Introduction

For many children and young people the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling or grandparent is an experience they are faced with during their school years. In many cases this is likely to have a significant impact on the child's emotional well-being, learning and educational performance. There is clear evidence that the longer term outcomes for these children can be significantly improved with appropriate support in place.

In some circumstances, a teacher or other member of school staff is the person a bereaved child or young person is most likely to turn to when they need to talk about their bereavement. There are also likely to be occasions when the death of a child or a significant member of the teaching or support staff within school can have an impact on a large number of people and this should be managed effectively and calmly. The role which schools have in supporting their pupils as members of a wider community is significant. It is important to have clear procedures and protocols which can provide a framework within which to offer support.

It is inevitable that teachers or members of staff within a school community will work with children affected by death in one way or another. The immediacy and enormity of these experiences may vary, but in each situation, the teachers and support staff involved have a genuine chance to positively affect a young life.

Most grieving pupils do not need a 'bereavement expert', they need people whom they know and who care about them, including their friends. Schools, by continuing to provide the reassurance of normal day-to-day activities with additional support available if needed, can do a huge amount to support a child who has suffered a bereavement. This policy should be viewed more as a framework to work around rather than something prescriptive.

Normality

For a child or young person whose life has been turned upside down, the routines of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may have fallen apart but school and the young people within it are still there, offering a sense of security and continuity.

A listening ear

Children can be overlooked by family members struggling to deal with their own grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm.

Relief from grief

For children and adolescents, school can give relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home. They may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family and there may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young people can find this difficult to deal with.

An outlet for grief

When a parent or sibling has died, children and young people can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. For some children, school can be seen as somewhere safe to express this upset.

The opportunity to be a child

Even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. Loss and grief are very grown-up experiences. School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty.

General support

A member of school staff should keep in contact with home to discuss concerns and also equally important to share successes. The family or carers will find this reassuring. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the child is coping.

Resources

School should utilise a selection of resources on the subject. Stories are a good way to gently introduce children to the concept of death. Novels and poems offer young people a chance to learn through reading, listening and discussion.

Responding to a death in your school community

The role that a school plays in supporting a child or young person who has experienced bereavement is often particularly important. The school's response will depend on individual circumstances and each pupil's needs and feelings.

Give each individual ownership of their grief

Everyone, child or adult, will grieve in their own way. It is important not to make assumptions about what they should be doing, how they should be feeling or what is going to help. When not sure, ask them what they would like to happen.

Supporting the parent or carer

Someone from school will be the point of contact for the family. It is helpful to offer to visit the family if they would find this helpful. It is essential to find out what the wishes of the family are in relation to the information they wish to be shared and the kind of response they feel should be made in school.

Check the facts surrounding the death and what the child has been told. Conflicting information from school and home will confuse and may cause the child to lose trust in those trying to help.

A card or letter of condolence will reassure the family of your support. A card to a bereaved child from his/her class is usually appreciated and helps keep up contact with school.

Staff and pupils may wish to attend the funeral. It is important to check that this is acceptable with the family before making arrangements. It will also be necessary to think through practical considerations such as how pupils are going to get there, and to plan cover for school staff. It can be helpful to ask parents to accompany their children to the funeral so that they can provide emotional support if it is needed.

Telling the school or class

With the advent of social media, news about a serious incident or death within the school community is often known widely by many people in a very short timescale. However it is still important, when breaking bad news, to obtain the permission of a bereaved child/family member before doing this. The child may or may not wish to be present. Consider with the family how giving the news to the school community should be done. The parent, carer or child may wish to write a letter to be read out in school. School may decide to explain in an

assembly or each teacher could individually tell their class. Avoiding the subject has been found to make matters worse. It is better to explain what has happened in a sensitive way to avoid rumours and whispers. It is far better to use the correct words 'death' and 'dead' rather than euphemisms such as 'lost' or 'gone to sleep'. It is helpful to explain to other pupils how the bereaved child may be feeling and to encourage them to be openly supportive, with some guidance on the kind of language to use.

Returning to school

Many bereaved children and young people find returning to school a very hard thing to do, but it may also be a welcome refuge of normality after the upset and emotion at home. Staff should try to make the return as fuss free as possible. The longer the return to school is delayed, the more difficult it is likely to be. Before the child returns, it is important to make sure all teaching and support staff are aware of what has happened.

The child will be able to identify a key person with whom they have a good relationship and who will keep an extra eye on them. As soon as possible, preferably before the start of class, a member of staff will talk to the child to acknowledge what has happened. If they begin to cry, reassure them that it is natural and OK to do so. In some cases, there may be no reaction at all as the child may wish to push the whole thing to the back of their mind in an attempt to be 'normal'. Over time, however, the child needs the opportunity to talk more openly about their feelings with someone they trust in school.

Long-term considerations

A bereaved child will find school very tiring. They may have difficulty concentrating, think more slowly, lack initiative and need more help than usual. Offer the opportunity to work in smaller groups than normal and ease up on homework. Work rate can be affected as long as a year or more. Bereaved children may feel different and not 'normal'. They may well be teased by others and it is important to try to keep an ear to the ground for signs of this and to deal with it promptly. Some curriculum subjects may be distressing and in such situations the child should be given the opportunity to talk about how he/she feels about a topic before starting it with the class.

Staff should be aware that Christmas, birthdays, Mother's or Father's day and other special events can be especially difficult and should ask the child how they feel about it. It will be important to watch out for changes in behaviour which may surface many months afterwards. Aggression may be a way of letting out feelings of anger or anxiety. Be equally alert for a pupil who is uncharacteristically quiet. Keep up contact with the family, especially if you suspect the child is having difficulties. Let them know your concerns. Inform new teachers and staff of the circumstances

Supporting a bereaved pupil

We are often at a loss to know what to say to a child or young person who has been bereaved and what we can do to help them. The following are brief guidelines on how to offer support -

Check out the facts and familiarise yourself with the circumstances surrounding the death.

Communicate with the family and make sure that what you say will not conflict with the family's wishes.

Acknowledge what has happened and do not be afraid to use the word 'death' – 'I was very sorry to hear of the death of your ...'

Children and young people need honesty. Although sometimes difficult, it is better to try to answer awkward questions truthfully. Be prepared to listen, again and again and again.

Allow them to express emotion and feelings and do not be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness. Do talk about the dead person and share any memories. The bereaved child may well need to do this. Ignoring the dead person is a denial that they ever existed.

Recognise the full tragedy. Do not try to comfort with comments such as 'at least it is not as bad as ...' Although you may think this is helpful, it is not.

Reassure them that they are not responsible. It is very common for children and young people to feel that in some way they caused the death.

Give a bereaved pupil time. It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school work. Remember that they will continue to experience the loss which will stay with them. Don't assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care. Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity.

Try not to judge, grief is a very personal experience and every child and young person will do it in their own way.

Roles and responsibilities

Expertise within the school will be utilised and responsibilities will be shared -

- The Headteacher/member of the Senior Leadership Team will take overall charge and designate substitutes should they be absent
- The Headteacher/member of the Senior Leadership Team will be responsible for communicating with the families directly involved.
- The Headteacher/member of the Senior Leadership Team will give the news to the rest of the school community
- If the press are involved, the lead person in school (Headteacher) will need to liaise closely with the local authority Press Officer
- Key staff to utilise any training undertaken

Breaking the news to staff, pupils and families

- The Headteacher/member of the Senior Leadership Team will obtain factual information as a priority, remembering that contact with those directly involved may be difficult. Staff will not make assumptions or repeat what has been heard through rumour, as this will only add to distress.
- All staff - including those in the front office – will be informed straightaway, ideally before pupils. This will be done as sensitively as possible and will include part-time staff
- Pupils should be told as soon as possible. This will be done in familiar groups by someone they know and not in a whole school assembly.
- A letter will go to families the same day if possible.

The first few days

- Ideally, there should be minimal disruption to the timetable, but some flexibility may be required
- Consideration to be given to pupils who are too upset to attend lessons. If it is a teacher who has died, a decision will be made specifically in regard to his/her class?

The funeral

- It is essential to sound out the family's wishes. The family may well welcome involvement of members of the school community but equally, may wish to keep it private.
- Staff and pupils who may want to attend will be identified and any practicalities such as transport will be decided beforehand. School will remain open for those who do not wish to attend the funeral.
- Flowers may be sent and/or a collection made and staff and pupils should be involved in the decision whilst keeping in mind the wishes of the family.
- Cultural and religious implications will need careful consideration.

Support for staff

- Supporting bereaved pupils will be very stressful for staff who may well be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. Ensure staff are aware of outside agencies who may be able to offer help, both short and long term.
- Informal mutual support, for example, in the staff room at the end of the school day, to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions.

Support for pupils

- It is important to identify pupils who may be particularly vulnerable, for example anyone who witnessed the death. This may also include those who themselves have recently suffered a bereavement who will be feeling particularly vulnerable.
- Ensure a list of outside professionals and agencies who can come into the school in the event of a traumatic death to counsel pupils is available.
- Make sure that help offered from outside is appropriate before accepting. Pupils may find it difficult to be receptive to support or counselling from families of fellow pupils.
- The Discovery Den is a suitable place in school for pupils who need some space if they are too upset to stay in the classroom. Pupils will be given the name of more than one person in school and be allowed to choose who they feel most able to speak to.

Saying goodbye

School will organise some sort of special assembly or remembrance service after a death in order to put back a sense of normality into what may have been a very unsettled time. The plans for the assembly will be discussed with the family first.

A special assembly aims to:

- Bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened
- Reflect on, and remember, the life of the person who has died
- Normalise and share grief
- Give the message that it is OK to be sad but equally OK to be not affected
- Inform pupils and staff of any support that is available

Attendees will include anyone who wishes to be there, including teachers and other school staff, pupils, and any families who feel able to do so. Depending on circumstances it may be more appropriate to hold a key stage assembly. Many families find comfort in other people organising something special and appreciate being there. Others may not wish to participate but should be given the opportunity to do so.

Pupils may wish to help produce the assembly about a friend who has died. It will help them to feel involved and gives a sense of doing something positive. Very young children will need greater amounts of adult input but can still participate in a way appropriate for their age and understanding.

The structure of the special assembly

The assembly will have a clear beginning, middle and an end. It will start with an explanation of the purpose and length of the assembly. Follow with a brief reminder of the circumstances surrounding the death and when it happened.

The middle section may include:

- lighting a special remembrance candle
- favourite songs or poems of the person who has died
- pupils or staff taking it in turns to recount stories or memories

- photographs of the person or child who has died to give a visual reminder whilst remembering that a large image can be too much for a grieving family
- placing objects into a special memory box. This can then be given to the family.
- Making a memory tree or a collage made by sticking a collection of drawings that pupils have created onto a large sheet of paper. This can be added to during the assembly.

The end section will aim to leave everyone with a sense of looking forward and may include:

- giving a memory box or memory book the family blowing out the remembrance candle
- going outside to release balloons. These could have a message attached.
- After leaving the assembly, pupils may each plant a bulb to create a special memory garden.
- asking pupils to bring a farewell message to the person who has died to put into a special box as they leave. This can help pupils to personalise the goodbye.
- reflective but uplifting music helps to create the right atmosphere.

The assembly will be arranged before a break so that pupils and staff have space to reflect before carrying on with the normal school timetable. School will need to be prepared for different responses, some pupils may be deeply affected, others not at all, or react with out of character behaviour. Ensure all children know where to go for support if needed

Resources

Child bereavement charity www.childbereavement.org.uk

Suggested words to use for an assembly can be found at - www.iflshoulddie.co.uk. A website with a link to 'poems and words of comfort' which might give ideas for appropriate texts to use.

A collection of writings, poems and extracts, from many sources that chart the journey of the bereaved from grief, rage and anguish through to hope for the future. Available from the Child Bereavement Charity Tel: 01494 568900.

Further sources of information, guidance, training and support within Kirklees

Educational Psychology Service: Tel 01924 324850 dewsbury.psychology@kirklees.gov.uk

Head Teacher Support Kirklees: www2.kirklees.gov.uk/.../headstrong/headteacherSupport.
graham.altoft@kirklees.gov.uk

Kirkwood Hospice: Tel. 01484 557900 info@kirkwoodhospice.co.uk

Children's Emotional Well-being Service ChEWS: Tel 01924 492183

www.northorpehall.co.uk

Michael Yarwood, Senior Communications Officer, Kirklees: Tel 01484 416667

michael.yarwood.@kirklees.gov.uk

Useful UK Websites

Help is at Hand (Dept of Health 2008)

www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/publications

Winston's Wish - bereavement support including downloadable resources for schools

www.winstonswish.org.uk

BBC Guide to Coping with Death and Bereavement

www.bbc.co.uk/relationships/copingwithgrief

RD4U – ‘The Road for You’ – a website designed for young people by young people as part of

Cruse Bereavement Care

www.rd4u.org.uk

Simon Says – child bereavement support including telephone helpline

www.simonsays.org.uk

Child Bereavement Charity – has sections for families, schools, children and young people

Tel 01494 568900 (9.00 to 5.00 weekdays)

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Samaritans – National Schools Co-ordinator - Christine Baird – 07831 509467

Samaritans – Suicide Prevention Response Line – 020 8394 8382

Suggested templates for letter to parents

Before sending a letter home to parents about the death of a pupil, permission must be gained from the child’s parents.

The contents of the letter and the distribution list must be agreed by the parents and school

Sample letter on death of a pupil:

Dear Parents

Your child’s class teacher/form tutor/had the sad task of informing the children of the death of <Name>, a pupil in <Year>.

<Name> died from an illness called <cancer>. As you may be aware, many children who have <cancer> get better but sadly <Name> had been <ill for a long time and died peacefully at home yesterday>.

He/She was a very popular member of the class and will be missed by everyone who knew him/her.

When someone dies it is normal for their friends and family to experience lots of different feelings like sadness, anger and confusion. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try to answer their questions at school but if there is anything more that you or your child needs to know, please do not hesitate to ring the school office and we would be more than happy to help you.

We will be arranging a memorial service in the school as a means of celebrating <Name’s> life.

Yours sincerely

<Name> Head Teacher

Sample letter to bereaved parents:

Dear

We are so very sorry to hear of <name's> death. There are no words to express the sadness of losing a child and we can only begin to imagine the anguish you must be going through.

Clearly, as a school community, we will miss him/her very much and we are doing our best to offer comfort and support to his/her friends and classmates. He/she was a much loved member of our school family.

If we can do anything to help as you plan <name's> funeral service or other memorial opportunities, please let us know. In time, we will also ensure that anything of <name's> that remains in school is returned to you, including photographs we may have on the school system.

Be assured that you are in our thoughts at this very sad time and do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of support in any way.

With sympathy,

Headteacher

Sample letter on death of a staff member:

Dear parents

I am sorry to have to tell you that a much-loved member of our staff [name] has died. The children were told today and many will have been quite distressed at the news. No-one wants to see children sad, but we are very aware that factual information and emotional support are the best means of helping children deal with bereavement. I am sure there will be many parents who are also saddened by the news. Children respond in different ways so may dip in and out of sadness, and questions, whilst alternately playing or participating in their usual activities. This is normal and healthy.

You may find your child has questions to ask which we will answer in an age-appropriate way in school, but if you feel you would like more support and advice yourself, please do not hesitate to contact the school office. You may also find some very useful advice and resources online at www.childbereavement.org.uk

We will share details of the funeral as soon as they are known. Children who wish to attend will be welcome to do so, though it will not be compulsory. It is likely that school will be closed on the morning or afternoon of the funeral as staff will, of course, wish to pay their respects to a very popular colleague.

I am sorry to be the bearer of sad news, but I appreciate an occurrence like this impacts the whole school community. I am so grateful for the thriving partnership we have with parents and trust that we, together, will be able to guide and support the children through what may be, for many, a very new experience in their lives.

Yours.....