

Guidance for parents on bereavement

Introduction

Every year 20,000 children under the age of 16 years in the UK will be bereaved of a parent and many more will experience the death of someone else special in their life. In addition to these individual pupils, schools may also experience the death of a child at the school or a staff member. It is almost inevitable therefore, that at some time all schools will have to deal with a death that affects the school community.

As children spend the vast majority of their time at school, teachers and staff members will be the primary source of care and support. Bereaved children will see our school as a safe haven away from the turmoil of emotions at home and will look to trusted staff members for help.

Death is something that most people choose not to think about so when faced with it we often find ourselves ill prepared. The purpose of this guidance on Bereavement is to help everyone involved at a time when there may be shock, upset and confusion, ensuring that there is as little disruption as possible, effective communication takes place and each member of the school community is supported to help them through a very difficult time.

The impact of death on young people

The impact of death upon children should not be underestimated. While it is true that their understanding of death develops over a prolonged period of time, it is clear that:

- Young children can suffer deeply as a result of the death of a member of their family.
- This suffering is more intense when they do not have opportunities to talk or to grieve openly, and do not feel that those close to them recognise their feelings - even though they themselves may not yet have the words to express them.
- In particular, for teenagers, there is sometimes a tendency not to talk about how they feel as they do not wish to place an extra burden on for example the remaining parent if their father or mother has died. They in effect try to manage on their own, which can be very difficult for them.

Reactions to bereavement can include:

Withdrawal
Open distress
Tears
Panic
Aggression
Anxiety

Fear
Other signs of stress
Bereaved children may act out this stress in unexpected ways, such as:
Nervous giggling

Stoical bravery
Untypical aggression
Becoming the class clown
Total Denial

They may also become extremely tired, to the point of exhaustion, as so much emotional energy goes into dealing with the loss and the stress of the changes in the family.

For some children, there may be additional terrors; if the death has been referred to as 'falling asleep' or 'being taken', then it is sometimes the case that children become afraid of sleep; words like 'loss' or 'lost' can put fear into a young child's mind, too, and they are afraid of losing other family members. Children can become particularly clinging and attached to the members of the family who remain.

An expected bereavement

In addition, the death of a terminally ill pupil or member of staff can be planned for with full support being given before the actual event. Often pupils will want to create a memory board to allow their emotions to be shared with others. Open discussion and realistic language are often the best way to deal with issues that arise. Once the pupil or member of staff dies then it is important that all emotional support is given and the need to mourn is recognised.

The impact of the death of a pet or loved animal

The School should also be aware of the emotional impact the death of a family pet or, for example, a horse or farm animal, might have on a pupil or a member of staff. Emotional support can be offered through the normal channels (Teachers, Form Teachers, Deputy, Assistant Heads) and discussion and honesty are vital. Terminology is again important. Again pupils and staff should be encouraged to be honest with their emotions and talk about their memories of their pets. Whilst much of this guidance deals with the death of people we should not underestimate how important the death of a pet can be to pupils and staff.

Bereavement toolkit

The Bereavement School Toolkit is a resource to be used at The Junior and Senior School offering guidance, examples and possible solutions to problems encountered on a day to day basis when trying to help bereaved children. It also includes a list of resources and useful contact details when looking for help and support.

How the school can help

Make sure that the right people are informed

It is essential that all staff, including support staff, know about the bereavement, so that they can respond sensitively.

Make sure that children are given an opportunity to discuss their feelings of bereavement with an adult that feels confident in this area and is able to give each child space for their different and normal feelings.

When the report of the death first comes to school, it may be appropriate for the relevant staff (for each bereaved sibling), to talk to the class or year group within it, to create opportunities for them to ask questions and discuss how they can help their bereaved classmate. On the child's return to school, even close friends may need encouragement to voice difficult feelings, to say, "I'm sorry your brother died". One of the key 'hurts' which bereaved children recall is the feeling that few people, if any, acknowledged their loss.

Most children welcome the opportunity to talk privately to an adult about their loss. Even if the child cannot verbalise his or her feelings, it is helpful for a trusted teacher to show sympathy (without saying "I know how you feel"), and to use words like sad, lonely, upset, afraid, so that the child realises the school knows about the death. The family may be so overwhelmed by the trauma that little individual acknowledgement is given to the child's feelings when they are at home.

Some children need a retreat when grief overtakes them, and it helps if the school accepts a pupil's need to express their grief, providing a 'safe place' and a trusted adult to be with them. Once the

bereaved child returns to school routine, it is helpful to share concerns with parents so that they know how he or she is coping in school. Most families appreciate some sort of direct communication from the school, especially if the child who has died was a former pupil.

Be prepared to create exceptional circumstances for particular children who need particular help. Set up clear boundaries and make it clear that you have allowed certain behaviours to happen. When the child is ready you can reverse these arrangements. A bereaved child for example may well need to be allowed to behave in a special way according to how they are dealing with the situation. The key is to try to create a normal environment for them by asking what they want to do. Talking, sharing with a Counsellor, writing or drawing are very common forms of expression which can help. It is always best to talk this through and share ideas with Assistant Heads, Deputy Head (Pastoral), the counsellor or the Designated Safeguarding Officer. They will help you to decide what to share with other children.

Seek creative, but sensitive ways of constructively moving the child forwards

Books, stories, music and art can be very helpful in exploring loss, both with other pupils and with the bereaved child. There are many excellent books written on bereavement for different ages of children, both in the fact and fiction sections, now available from shops, our library or the web. Sensitivity is needed so that deep grief is not triggered at an inappropriate time. For example, a school assembly using literature on the subject might help the school to explore grief and loss, but not when a newly-bereaved child is present.

Be aware that this is likely to take a long while and be prepared to allow for anniversaries and gestures over time

The grief caused by the death will be long-lasting, and schools need to recognise that anniversaries and celebrations will be difficult – especially the first birthday and Christmas or other religious festivals. It will help if key dates and times are noted and passed on to the next class teacher or next school, along with other records and information. As children mature, the death is felt and questioned at new levels, both emotionally and intellectually, often causing renewed grief and distress.

Close friends of the bereaved boy or girl, or of the child who has died, will suffer varying grief reactions. Their teachers will probably need the support of colleagues at this time; they might need to be reassured that their ideas for giving comfort to the children are wise, and that they will be of benefit to those in their care. Many younger teachers themselves may not have experienced bereavement, especially of this kind, before.

If the person who died was a pupil at your school, you might feel it appropriate to send a representative to the child's funeral or a Memorial or Thanksgiving service – if the family are in agreement with this idea. Also, in these circumstances, the child's books and work should be kept carefully and returned to the family by a teacher at a suitable time.

Helping the school recover

This is a long-term issue. You can help a school recover through a memorial service or assembly and through the use of counsellors. Recognise that those who go to counsellors may well not be those whose need is greatest. A brother or sister may well have intense needs that appear later. It is very difficult for the school to know when to stop making allowances.

How children grieve

Preschool-age children (2-5 years old)

At this stage of development children believe that death is reversible. They may also be convinced that it was something that they said or did which caused the person to die. Abstract concepts are not easily grasped, and so it is important that the child is spoken to in very concrete terms. In order to make sense of what has happened children at this age may often ask the same questions over and over again. Key points at this age: children are curious about death and believe death is temporary or reversible. Children may see death as something like sleeping— the person is dead but only in a limited way and may continue to breathe or eat after death. Children are characterized by ‘magical thinking’ and understand the world as a mix of reality and fantasy. Children are naturally egocentric and see themselves as the cause of events around them. Children often feel guilty and believe that they are responsible for the death of a loved one, perhaps because they were ‘bad’ or wished the person would ‘go away’. They may think that they can make the deceased come back if they are good enough. Children will worry about who will take care of them and about being abandoned. They are still greatly affected by the sadness of surviving family members. They cannot put their feelings into words and instead react to loss through behaviours such as irritability, aggression, physical symptoms, difficulty sleeping, or regression (such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking).

Primary school-age children (six to 12 years)

Children begin to develop the understanding that death is irreversible and something that happens eventually to all living things. Death may be regarded as something that is a bit ‘spooky’, and they may display what seems to be an unhealthy curiosity in the more morbid aspects of the death. Children at this age may complain of headaches, a sore tummy or other ailments. These are referred to as ‘somatic’ complaints and are generally physical manifestations of emotional pain. Behaviour may change, but it is important to encourage children at this age to express their feelings and understand that what they are feeling is perfectly natural. Key points at this age: Understand that death is final, but see it as something that happens only to other people. They may think of death as a person or a spirit, like a ghost, angel, or a skeleton. Children understand that death is universal, unavoidable, and will happen to them (by age 10). Children are often interested in the specific details of death and what happens to the body after death. They may experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness, and worry about their own death. They continue to have difficulty expressing their feelings and may react through behaviours such as school phobia, poor performance in school, aggression, physical symptoms, withdrawal from friends, and regression. They still worry about who will take care of them and will likely experience insecurity, clinginess, and fear of abandonment and may still worry that they are to blame for the death.

Adolescents and teenagers

At this stage of development, young people are developing their own ideas about who they are and what is important to them in their lives. They are more aware of their future. Death may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings. As adults our job is to let them know that we are there if they need to talk, or that we can find someone else to help if necessary. Although the grieving process at this age is much like adults, teenagers are still developing emotionally, and need support. By now young people are much more aware of the finality of death, and the impact that the death has had on them. The death of someone important may make them feel different, at the very time that they want to be the same as everyone else. They are aware of the longer term impact of their loss, when future milestones will not be shared with the

person who has died. Relationships with others are becoming increasingly important, and any loss can lead to feelings of anger or severe distress. Key points at this age:

- Have an adult understanding of the concept of death, but do not have the experiences, coping skills, or behaviour of an adult.
- May 'act out' in anger or show impulsive or reckless behaviours, such as substance misuse or fighting in school.
- May experience a wide range of emotions, but not know how to handle them or feel comfortable expressing them.
- The reality of death contradicts a teenager's view of himself or herself as invincible, and teenagers may question their faith or their understanding of the world.
- Developmental issues of independence and separation from parents can interfere with the ability to receive support from adult family members.
- Coping strategies may create tension with family members, as adolescents may cope by spending more time with friends or by withdrawing from the family to be alone.

List of Dos and Don'ts

Talking to Someone about Bereavement or Loss

DO let your genuine concern and caring show.

DO be available ... to listen or to help with whatever else seems needed at the time.

DO say you are sorry about what happened and about their pain.

DO allow them to express as much unhappiness as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share.

DO encourage them to be patient with themselves, not to expect too much of themselves and not to impose any "shoulds" on themselves.

DO allow them to talk about their loss as much and as often as they want to.

DO talk about the special, endearing qualities of what they've lost.

DO reassure them that they did everything that they could in the circumstances.

DON'T let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out.

DON'T avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided by friends adds pain to an already painful experience).

DON'T say how you know how they feel. (Unless you've experienced their loss yourself you probably don't know how they feel.)

DON'T say "you ought to be feeling better by now" or anything else which implies a judgement about their feelings.

DON'T tell them what they should feel or do.

DON'T change the subject when they mention their loss. **DON'T** avoid mentioning their loss out of fear of reminding them of their pain (they haven't forgotten it).

DON'T try to find something positive at the initial stages of input (e.g. a moral lesson, closer family ties, etc.) about the loss. This might be more appropriate at a later stage.

DON'T point out at least they have their other ...

DON'T say they can always have another

DON'T suggest that they should be grateful for their ...

DON'T make any comments which in any way suggest that their loss was their fault (there will be enough feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from their friends).

A Guide for teachers and parents in cases of loss

Explaining the death of a Classmate / Teacher / Staff Member in Children.

The following is good to apply in the classroom and not in a school assembly

Example:

- Children should be informed of the death in a calm and direct manner.
- We use language that is appropriate for the age of the children. (This means giving honest explanations, not ambiguities such as 'falling asleep or leaving').
- We rely on what the children already know before giving explanations and then move on to new information...
- ('remember when _____ came to school after losing his hair and we explained to you that he had a physical illness called cancer', 'remember how _____ started to miss school more and more and needed to stay in the hospital?')
- Unfortunately, _____ was so ill that neither the doctors nor the nurses nor the drugs could cure him and he died last night. '
- If our audience is made up of very young children we say, "Do you all understand what it means when we say someone is dying?"
- After the above announcement we allow the children to:
 - Ask questions
 - Express their thoughts and feelings
 - Express themselves through art, poetry and card making
 - Collect souvenirs of the deceased in a commemorative album to share with his family
 - Complete a school assignment to honor the deceased

One of the most effective behaviours a teacher can adopt is to encourage discussion of the deceased in the following way:

The teacher says:

- One of the nicest memories I have of _____ is _____.
- He / She then asks:
 - Would any of you want to share some of the memories you have with _____?
 - What is one of the most pleasant memories you have with _____?
 - What was one of the coolest things _____ did for you?

Teachers / counsellors can ask open-ended questions to help children express further concerns about death.

- Have you heard anything that concerns you about _____'s death?
- Do you have any concerns about the death of _____ you would like to discuss at group or individual level? (Looking for concerns about the causes of death, such as guilt or self-accusations).

Guidance/support given to parent by the School Counsellor regarding the attendance of the funeral.

Children may want to attend the funeral.

- Explain to the children what the environment will include (e.g. the presence of a coffin, people dressed in black).
- We explain to children that there will be a fluctuation of emotional reactions.
- Words we can say to the deceased's family.
- We encourage parents to accompany their children to the funeral.
- We recommend that children return to school. If they feel that they need further support, contact a specialist.

Suggested Reading

Early Years & KS1

Alicia Sims : Am I still a sister? Big A & Co, 1986. ISBN 0-9618995-0-6
Susan Varley : Badger's Parting Gifts, HarperCollins, 1992. ISBN 000 664 3175 Remembering my brother Ginny Perkins, A&C Black, 1996 ISBN 0-7136- 4541-5
Doris Stickney: Waterbugs and Dragonflies, Mowbray, 1997. ISBN 0 264 66904 5
Diana Crossley: Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine, Hawthorn Press (2 Oct. 2000) ISBN 1869890582

Years 3–8

E. B. White : Charlotte's web Penguin, 1993. ISBN 014 036 4498
Gloria Houston: My brother Joey died - TCF (USA), 1982. ISBN 0-671- 42401-7
Dwaine Steffes : When someone dies: help for young people coping with grief Cruse Bereavement Care, 1997 (student edition). ISBN 0 900 321 113
Linda Hoy: Your friend, Rebecca Heinemann Educational, 1992. ISBN 043 512 3882
Charlotte Moundlic: The Scar Walker (7 Feb. 2013) ISBN 140634415X
Oliver Jeffers: The Heart and the Bottle
Jacqueline Wilson: Vicky Angel by (for the loss of a friend)

Years 7-9

Charlotte's web E. B. White Penguin, 1993. ISBN 014 036 4498
My brother Joey died Gloria Houston TCF (USA), 1982. ISBN 0-671-42401-7
When someone dies: help for young people coping with grief Dwaine Steffes Cruse Bereavement Care, 1997 (student edition). ISBN 0 900 321 113
Your friend, Rebecca Linda Hoy Heinemann Educational, 1992. ISBN 043 512 3882

Supporting Bereaved Students in Primary and Secondary Schools — practical advice for staff is a booklet that has been developed by King's College London and the National Council for Hospice and Specialist Palliative Care Services, now the National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC). It offers advice and support to school staff and includes tips from teachers who have had experience with bereaved children. An extensive resource list is included for those who wish to look further into the issues explored or enlist further support.

The booklet can be ordered from NCPC by contacting Nick Hayes by email n.hayes@ncpc.org.uk or by telephone 00 44 20 7697 1520.

Teachers

Forgotten mourners, The: Susan Smith Guidelines for working with bereaved children Jessica Kingsley, 1999 (2nd edition). ISBN 1 85302 758 8

Good Grief – No. 2: Over 11s and adults Barbara Ward Jessica Kingsley, 1995 (2nd edition). ISBN 1 85302 340 X

Talking with children and young people about death and dying Mary Turner Jessica Kingsley, 1999. ISBN 1 85302 563 1

When someone dies: how schools can help bereaved students Dwaine Steffes Cruse Bereavement Care, 1997 (teachers' edition). ISBN 0 900321 105

Weblinks

For adults and those working with children in schools <https://www.cruse.org.uk/> 22

Supports children and young people <https://www.winstonswish.org/> UK Helplines Winston;s Wish 00 44 8088 020 021 Cruse 00 44 808 808 1677

External sources of support

Winston's Wish <https://www.winstonswish.org/coronavirus/>

Grief Encounter <https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/serviceupdate/>

Childhood Bereavement Network <http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/covid-19.aspx>

Hope Again (youth section of Cruse) [Hope Again](#)