



# **Supporting Pupils Through Bereavement Policy**

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**Supporting Children Through Bereavement**

**Aims**

The aim of this policy is to provide guidance for school leaders and staff in supporting the school community in circumstances of bereavement.

**Contents**

1. Communication
2. Talking to pupils, families and the school community about a death
3. Supporting grief from a distance
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While the stark reality of coronavirus is dominating the news, it's important to remember that children grieve all deaths equally. Whether COVID-19 related or from causes we're more familiar with, right now grieving is a different experience for all. We can't come together and take comfort in each other's presence and we need to be able to respond to death in a virtual space.

**1. Communication**

Any disclosures of a bereavement should be emailed to SLT immediately and kept confidential.

**2. Talking to pupils, families and the school community about a death**

**2.1 Contact the bereaved child's family**

The Head Teacher or other senior leader should make this difficult phone call.

They will have some notes prepared ahead of time. For example:

**Acknowledge what has happened** – "I'm so sorry to hear that Gemma's grandmother died yesterday." If appropriate, the staff member will ask how the death occurred – staff need an understanding of what's happened so the child can be supported (and the rest of your school community) appropriately

**Express support on behalf of the school** – "I'm calling to let you know that we're here for you and for Gemma and to see if there's anything we can do to help."

Explain what sort of support we have available at school, e.g. a wellbeing team, that will keep in touch with the pupil as they grieve (PSW, SENDCo, SLT)

Explain that we have some strategies that may help with grief as and when they may need them. See Child Bereavement UK

**Discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community** – "Would it be alright for me to let Gemma's teachers and classmates know what's happened? I'm sure they'll want to be there for her right now."

**Ask the family if you can share their contact information** – "Gemma's class would probably like to reach out to her so she doesn't feel alone right now. Would you mind if they sent a condolences card?"

Take the following steps in line with what you've agreed with the family (for example, about how much information they're happy for you to share and who with, and whether/how they wish to be contacted with condolences).

**2.2 Notify staff** -Senior leaders should meet with the bereaved child's class teacher and phase leader to let them know what's happened and the rest of the adults in the bubble (provided permission was given from parents). SLT to give a copy of the bereavement policy to both the class teacher and phase leader. The Head Teacher might tell the rest of the staff at this point, or may wish to limit this to teachers or staff members the child is taught by or close to.

**2.3 Bereavement List** Senior Leaders to add to the bereavement list saved in staff resources.

**2.4 Telling the class** (With consent from parents and child) Adults naturally want to protect, but children have a much greater capacity to deal with the harsh realities of life than we realise, as long as they are told in an appropriate way. Even a very sad truth will be better than uncertainty and confusion. What a child does not know they tend to make up and their fantasies can be very distressing to them and difficult to deal with.

Do not be afraid to use the word "dead." It may feel harsh but euphemisms such as "lost" or "gone away" only create confusion and misunderstanding in children who take what they hear very much at face value. (See appendix 1 Children's understanding of death at different ages).

The only reason you would disclose to your class would be to support the child, therefore it could look like the following: When child A returns to school they may not be themselves or may be sad, as they have had some very sad news, their ??????? has died from a long illness.

### 3. Supporting grief

3.1 A Thrive Being assessment should be carried out two weeks after the funeral (provided not a funeral that has been delayed, in this case leave the child to settle after the event for 4 weeks).

3.2 You may not be able to put your normal school bereavement strategy into action right now, but there's still plenty you can do to support grieving children:

PSHE lessons that cover loss and death

3.3 SLT to offer parents, support for the child, such as social stories and activities for Loss delivered from either SLT or PSW with dedicated time allocated – 30 minutes per week over 6 weeks. This will also include Thrive memory jars and memory organza bags.

3.4 SLT to offer parents support such as Formal school counselling for the child.

### 3. Talking about death and grieving

When talking to bereaved children, staff are reminded to:

- **Listen and validate** – children often don't recognise their feelings as grief. Staff should let them know that whatever they're feeling is normal and okay. The most helpful thing that you can do for grieving children, is to acknowledge what has happened. Keep it very simple, “I was very sorry to hear that \*\*\* has died, that is a very sad thing to have happened.”
- **Acknowledge their fears** – children's fears, no matter how irrational, are real and can't always be taken away. Just knowing that someone they trust is listening to them is helpful
- **Reassure, but only as much as staff can do so honestly** – for example, a child whose family member has died will quite rationally be afraid of other family members dying. It's unhelpful to try to calm a child's fears by saying that won't happen when it already has, and it can diminish the child's trust in adults. Rather, staff should acknowledge the possibility but counter with facts about how rare this is
- **Check their understanding** – children can be very literal, and what might seem obvious to adults may not be so clear to them. As staff talk to them, they should regularly check that they understand what you've said
- **Share your own feelings** – it's okay to let children know that staff are also sad and upset. It can be reassuring that what they're feeling is normal

#### **If the bereaved child is struggling to express themselves**

Grief is overwhelming at any age, and children may struggle to express what they're going through. Staff may choose to start the conversation by:

- Sharing Lost for words – a free e-book of advice by grieving children for grieving children
- Sharing 'Thunks on death' – a set of cards designed to open discussion about death and grief
- Completing memory books or boxes with special items and pictures associated with the person
- Reading a story related to the child's circumstances (see bereavement book list attached)

### Supporting staff who are supporting bereaved pupils

Working with bereaved children is painful, and staff members involved will also need support.

Child Bereavement UK gives the following tips for managing staff who take on this important role:

- **Don't let them go at it alone** – make sure more than one staff member is assigned to each bereaved child. Not only will this share the load, but it'll also ensure that all staff assigned to a child have someone to talk to without breaching confidentiality
- **Check in with them regularly** – be proactive and be the one reaching out. Staff may feel guilty about asking for your time in the current situation
- **Be prepared to step in** – tell them to step back if it becomes clear they're overwhelmed
- **Make bereavement training available** – many organisations offer training for school staff, including:
  - Child Bereavement UK - scripts to help with what to say in different situations.
  - Winston's Wish
  - Cruse Bereavement Care
  - EduCare

Reviewed by: M.Basri – November 2020

### Bereavement book list

#### Under 5

Bennys hat  
 Dear grandma bunny - miffy books  
 Goodbye mousie  
 I miss you - a first look at death  
 Is daddy coming back in a minute  
 Missing mummy  
 Stewarts tree  
 The I love you book  
 What happened to Daddys body

#### 5 - 8 years

A birthday present for Daniel  
 Always and forever  
 Badgers parting gifts  
 Her Mothers fsce  
 Luna's Red hat  
 Muddles, puddles and sunshine  
 Mum's jumper  
 The copper tree  
 The huge bag of worries  
 The magical wood  
 The invisible string

The little flower bulb  
The scar  
The sunshine cat  
Saying goodbye to daddy  
What does dead mean  
When dinosaurs die

### 9 - 12 years

Lifetimes  
Only one of me - a love letter from Mum/Dad  
Michael Rosens sad book  
Millys bug nut  
My sister lives on the mantelpiece  
The cat mummy  
The secret C  
What on Earth do you do when someone dies  
A fault in our stars  
A Monster calls  
Straight talk about death for teenagers  
The lost boys appreciation society

### Other helpful books not directly related to death

Angry Arther  
No Matter what  
Nothing  
Something else  
A little princess  
Bambi  
Charlottes web  
Danny the champion of the world  
Harry potter and the philosopher's stone  
James and the giant peach  
Little women  
Oliver twist  
The secret garden

### Books for adults supporting bereaved child

A childs grief - supporting a child when someone in their family has died  
And when did you last see your father  
As big as it gets - supporting your child when someone is seriously ill  
Beyond the rough rock - supporting a child who has been bereaved through suicide  
Grief in children - A handbook for adults  
Hope beyond the headlines - supporting a bereaved child through murder or manslaughter  
Never too young to grieve - supporting children under 5 after the death of a parent  
Talking about death - a dialogue between parent and child  
The family has been informed - Military  
We all grieve - supporting SEN children  
You just dont understand - bereaved teenagers

## Children's understanding of death at different ages

### Children under 2 years of age

Babies and young children have no understanding of the concept of death yet, long before they are able to talk, babies are likely to react to upset and changes in their environment brought about by the absence of a significant person who responded to their needs for care and nourishment on a daily basis. They will also be impacted by the emotional withdrawal that may happen if a parent or main carer is bereaved.

Up to the age of 6 months, babies will experience a sense of abandonment and insecurity which may result in increased crying and disruption of sleep and feeding. From around the age of 8 months or so, babies begin to develop a 'mental image' of the person who has died and have a sense of 'missing them'. Babies at this age may cry more or become more withdrawn; they may lose interest in toys or food and, as they develop motor skills and language, may call out for or search for the person who has died. You can help by giving lots of reassurance, and by keeping to normal routines as much as possible.

### Children aged 2 to 5 years

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. Provide honest answers to their questions but do not feel you have to tell them everything in detail or all at once. Information can be built on over time.

Children may have disrupted sleep, altered appetite, less interest in play and may become more anxious about separation even when being left with familiar adults. There may be regression in skills such as language or toilet training.

### Children of primary school age

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.

Children at this age need honest answers to their questions that can be built on over time, and opportunities to express their feelings. They can need reassurance that nothing they said or thought caused the death.

## Teenagers

Adolescence is a time of great change and grief impacts on the developmental task of moving from dependence to independence. Young people are moving from familial ties to increased involvement with peers. It can be difficult to ask for support while trying to demonstrate independence. Young people do not like to feel different to their peers in any way and being a bereaved young person can be extremely isolating. The support of peers with similar experiences can be very powerful.

Teenagers will have an adult understanding of the concept of death but often have their own beliefs and strongly held views, and may challenge the beliefs and explanations offered by others.

Some young people may respond to a death by becoming more withdrawn, some may 'act out' their distress while others cope with the awareness of their own mortality through risk-taking behaviour. Others may take on adult responsibilities and become 'the carer' for those around them. Keeping to the usual boundaries of acceptable behaviour can be reassuring for bereaved young people.

Young people who have been bereaved at an earlier age may need to re-process their grief as they think about and plan for their future and fully understand the impact of life without the person who died.