

Bereavement Policy

Informing Staff and Governors of a Death within the School Community

A death can affect the school community in different ways and depends on:

- The role that the deceased person had in school
- How well known they were in the local community
- Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide or other violent deaths.

Experience has shown that adults and children benefit from being kept informed of a death in school. Rumour and gossip can be very damaging and can lead to both young and old developing the attitude that the death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity and if they are not informed of the circumstances or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be obstructed.

The following guidelines may help when informing staff and governors:

- Arrange a staff meeting as soon as practicable. Identify absent staff
- Tell the story of what happened leading up to the death
- Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred
- Be prepared for obvious upset and feeling of anger /guilt. People may connect the incident to their own personal experience of bereavement, so feelings about past bereavements may need to be discussed. This is perfectly natural
- To enable absent staff to feel part of a caring team, arrangements should be made to inform them over the telephone if a personal visit is impractical. Consider the relationship between the absent colleague and deceased
- For a death that may attract media coverage (e.g. if the member of staff was a well-known personality or died tragically), identify a nominated spokesperson (e.g. Chair of Governors, LA spokesperson etc.) to provide a 'news statement' at an agreed time, as a way of dealing with media intrusion. Liaison with the individual's family is essential
- Try to establish a 'protected' telephone line to ensure free flow of accurate information to and from the school/hospital if this is appropriate. (If schools have one direct line, consider the loan of a mobile telephone)
- With death in traumatic circumstances such as suicide or murder, consider requesting bereavement support services - Winston's Wish, Cruse, Compassionate Friends and the Educational Psychology Service (if psychological de-briefing is thought necessary)
- Arrange staff condolences with collaborative agreement if felt appropriate
- Provide details of someone who can be available to talk things through with a member of staff, parent or child if they are finding the situation particularly hard. This person could advise the family of support services available if required
- Nominate staff to prepare a newsletter to parents and carers (to be given after school)
- Arrange a staff meeting for the end of the working day and invite each person to recount his or her feelings and to describe what was good and bad about the day

- Staff who will be alone that night could be identified and arrangements made for colleagues to contact them by phone
- Speed and chaos may be a major factor on a day when a Critical Incident has happened – the speed and chaos sometimes means that constantly referring to plans and lists is not possible. Be confident enough to go with your gut instinct. Remember that keeping people as informed as possible is always helpful, and don't bear all the responsibility yourself, share it round.

Trained and experienced practitioners are always available on the Winstons Wish helpline should you want to check out ideas throughout the day.

Informing Children and Young People

Children do grieve, and even very young children will want to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly of all, what happens next? The following guidelines will help you to inform children of the death of a teacher or other member of staff:

- Identify those children who had a long-term and / or close relationship with the deceased to be told together as a separate group. Where possible inform all the pupils in the smallest group practicable. Class or working groups are ideal
- It is more beneficial if all pupils are informed. It is always a shock when a death occurs in a school even if it may have been anticipated. In the eyes of the pupils, teachers are part of the fittings and fixtures in school and are not expected to die. Children expect to live forever, and so a fellow pupil dying whilst still young enough to attend school can also feel quite shocking
- Provide staff with guidelines on how to inform children. For example:
 - "I've got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. I know most of you will have heard of cancer, and know that sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it. Mrs X, the one of our class teachers, has been ill with cancer for a long time. I have to tell you that Mrs X died yesterday in hospital"
 - "Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. Sadly, there are some accidents that cause people to die. I have some really sad news to tell you that might upset you. Yesterday X, who is in Year 4, was in an accident and he was so badly injured that he died"
- Refer to name naturally, "Mrs X died from cancer".
- Children and young people will appreciate time to verbalise their feelings and fears. Allow space for "If only's" to be acknowledged
- Discussion - allow pupils to share their own experiences of death, e.g. "When my pet / my Gran died", etc
- Be honest about your own feelings and experiences, and talk honestly about the relationship that you had with the person
- Answer pupil's questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like 'passed away', or 'lost' etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children

- Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care
- End up discussion on a positive note - not all people who are ill or have accidents die - many get better. Consider a prayer to remember the deceased and their family. Perhaps co-ordinate an assembly to end discussion
- Does the school want to arrange for representatives to attend the funeral? How will this be managed? This would normally be the Headteacher
- Try to identify any key answers that you may need to prepare, e.g. the facts about an illness, or dates which may be relevant to the death such as end of school year and changing class or schools.

Informing Parents of the Death of a Pupil

These are two examples of a letter to parents. Please feel free to change them according to the needs of the situation.

Headed paper
<Date>

Dear Parents and Carers

Your child's class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the tragic death of <Name>, who has been a teacher at this school for <number> years.

Our thoughts are with <Name>'s family at this time and in an effort to try and respond to his/her death in a positive, all children have been informed.

The children were told that <Name> died from an asthma attack on <Date>. A number of pupils have been identified as being asthmatic and <Name>, the School Nurse has today reassured them that it is unusual for a person to die from asthma.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings - sadness, anger, and confusion - which are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

The funeral will take place at <Named Church or Crematorium> on <Day and Date> at <Time>.

Yours sincerely

<Name>
Headteacher

Headed paper

<Date>

Dear Parents and Carers

Your child's tutor had the sad task of informing the children of the death of <Name>, a pupil in <Year>

They were told that <name> died from an illness called cancer. Sometimes people who have cancer can get better, but other times people die from it. <Name> had been ill with cancer for a long time and died at home yesterday.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion - these are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

The funeral will take place at <Named Church or Crematorium> on <Day and Date> at <Time>.

Yours sincerely

<Name>

Headteacher

Appendix: Support for Bereavement

Rationale

This document has been prepared for teachers and other adults who are faced with an individual or group of bereaved children. It is not designed to make anyone into specialist grief counsellors but tries to address the very practical questions that are likely to face a teacher / adult in this situation. Children are all different and they will all react to bereavement in their own very unique way. The difference in their levels of awareness, understanding, age, emotional maturity, security and not least, their relationship with the deceased, will have significant effects.

Background

The trauma of bereavement can have the effect of throwing a school in at the deep end. Most meet such situations as they arise, without giving much prior thought to the response that will be needed. It makes sense to take time to put even loose contingency plans into place by reflecting on how the school could or should respond in a tragic situation.

In common with other PACE work already done in schools, bereavement issues should be approached several times in the course of primary and secondary education, each time building on what has been introduced before.

Common reactions in adults and children

Adults and children can respond in broadly similar ways to grief and bereavement. Reactions will depend on the nature of the incident, their degree of involvement with it and their own personality and coping skills. For adults, reactions may be manifested behaviourally or physically by such symptoms as:

- Tiredness
- Sleep disturbance
- Tension
- Menstrual irregularity
- Difficulty concentrating
- Intolerance
- Shaking
- Tearfulness
- Irritability
- Loss of appetite
- Headaches
- Depression
- Nausea
- Memory difficulties
- Increased sensitivity

As well as the above reactions, children may also display the following:

- Increased misbehaviour and acting younger
- Pretend play and acting out the traumatic incident
- Sleep disturbance including fear of the dark or of being alone
- Clinging behaviour with parents/carers
- Preoccupation with the traumatic event
- Difficulty concentrating in school
- Heightened alertness to danger including sensitivity to loud noises
- Changes in appetite
- Fears for their own safety or for that of family and friends
- Reluctance to talk

For both children and adults, it is their naturally available communities (family, friends and colleagues) who will provide the most appropriate and potential sources of help and support. External sources of support should be sensitive to the needs of these natural communities and should seek to augment, validate and reassure these to enhance rather than detract from their effectiveness.

Features:

- If a child feels secure with a particular teacher, it is likely that they will come to that teacher specifically for comfort or enlightenment and it is important that the teacher has given some thought as to how he / she should respond. Children and even older teenagers see things in terms of black and white. The result is that their questions may be disconcertingly blunt and the teacher may find himself / herself upset by the form of the question, or the inability to answer it
- A natural instinct may be to protect a child from the magnitude of his or her loss. It is probably wiser for the teacher to present reality as it is
- The child / children should be told as soon as possible that a person has died to prevent him / her learning from some other and often inappropriate source. The teacher should use a normal tone of voice and clear direct language and avoid hushed whispers which may convey unnatural and spooky feelings
- Whenever possible, children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where the child will feel more secure: class teachers would be the most appropriate person
- It is important to tell the truth as far as you know it. Even white lies will have to be renegotiated later. Children will vary in their ability at any one time to take in particular explanations. If the information is limited, the teacher should tell what he / she knows and then make every effort to find out more
- It is very important to let children know that it is natural and acceptable to be upset and to cry (even for adults) It is better to share feelings rather than to deny them. Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from the extreme grief reactions and adults who are prostrate with grief may need some time and space initially to release their most extreme reactions

- The teacher should encourage the child to ask question and should tailor his / her answers to the child's level of understanding, within his / her home religion or culture and your own belief system
- It is important that teachers / adults don't force children to behave in a prescribed manner. Some children may have been brought up not to show their emotions. Others, particularly in their teens may repress grief as they see crying as a babyish emotion which means that they will lose face in front of their friends. These inappropriate coping strategies can only work for a while and often leave some children out of synch with their peers i.e. appearing in control when all the others are upset and later cracking up with grief and guilt when all the others have come to terms with the loss
- There are several phases of grief. The initial stage of disbelief usually passes quickly, but many individuals are in this stage for some considerable time. The feelings of depression have to be passed through, even fleetingly, before the individual can begin again to look positively. This makes it particularly difficult when several children are going through the grieving process (e.g. a class reacting to the death of one of their peers) as they will all be at different stages at the same time and it should be allowed to run its natural course
- Very young children (under 5 years) are beginning to develop their independence from the security of the home and the loss can be particularly damaging to them. They may also express their disturbance in indirect ways (e.g. bedwetting, nightmare) and should be reassured and comforted. Other very vulnerable children are those from already insecure backgrounds i.e. broken families, marital instability etc, and these children may have severe reactions to the new loss. All children can come to terms with the loss and the aim is to provide support and comfort so that the trauma is gradually overcome, rather than remain a permanent block to their emotional development
- Traumatic Death. Children who have witnessed a dramatic death or deaths, or been involved in a disaster, or other trauma, may need specialised treatment. Parents and schools too may need help. These experiences are often too shocking and disruptive to be absorbed and worked through over time.

The Overall Message in helping bereaved children:

- Try to maintain feelings of security, of being cared for, of being loved
- Maintain all the necessary practical care
- Be honest at the child's level of understanding
- Continue to talk and communicate
- Do not pretend to believe what you don't believe
- Don't be afraid to share your own feelings
- Remember there are others who can help
- Don't be afraid to admit to colleagues, family and managers that you can't cope at any particular time.

Other Crises.

There are other crises which can have an effect on pupils. Many people tend to associate bereavement with a permanent deprivation of a loved one through their death. However, it is worthwhile remembering that for many children there are other losses which may be experienced as though it were bereavement. The emotional and behavioural outcomes can be similar to those in the bereavement process. Examples could include the following:

- Divorce
- Death of grandparents or other close relative
- Death of a pet
- Parents in prison
- Disabled or seriously ill sibling
- Parent returning to paid employment
- Parents changing jobs. Changing schools
- Violence, sexual Harassment
- Drug problems
- Hospital stay
- Children in care.

These situations may not affect the whole of the class but it can to a large extent affect individual pupil performance in class. It would be very demanding to create a specific contingency plan for each situation but in general the initial response to an upset child should be, as is normally the case, to identify the source of the distress, the child's response and the support required with the assistance of various specialists: educational psychologists, school health visitor, external sources. The normal referral routes should apply but in general, consideration should be given to the following:

- What support can the child expect at home?
- What can teachers do?
- Does the situation demand the involvement of the whole class?
- Can a visit to the home or a meeting with the parents be useful?
- Has the pupil close, supportive friends?
- Should external agencies be contacted?

Procedures.

When death occurs outside of school (e.g. illness, accident , suicide, murder) an immediate action plan will include :

- The development of routines which ensure that the Headteacher is informed by parents or other authorities (police, hospital)
- The Headteacher verifies information about the child's death before informing teachers and classmates. The Headteacher gathers as many facts as possible about the event from parents and others (police, fire brigade, hospital) Information should be gathered:

- when, where and how it happened?
- were other pupils present?
- where is the child now?
- The Headteacher takes responsibility for information to:
 - teachers / staff
 - class and other pupils (assisted by teachers) for death notification
- Plan for the rest of the day is activated to include support in the classroom
- If Press approach, they should be referred to the Local Authority's Press Officer and affected family, classmates and staff should be shielded
- A meeting should be held to discuss plans for the following day. All teachers in classes affected by the death should attend.

A pupil's parent or sibling dies.

The pupils' homes should be informed that in the case of a death in the child's closest family, the Headteacher or the class teacher should be informed. If the death happens while the child is at school, a representative for the family, preferably a parent/carer, should come to the school to inform the child. In many circumstances, a teacher will have to give the death notification.

Before notifying fellow pupils, the class teacher should speak with the bereaved child to determine what information should be given to his / her classmates and in what form. Some children prefer to be absent while this information is given, some want to participate. It is helpful if classmates are informed about how their bereaved classmate wants to talk about what has happened (i.e. speak openly and take the initiative, or let the bereaved child decide when he / she wants to talk)

It is a symbolic gesture to the bereaved child and the family if a representative of the school, preferably the Headteacher, is present at the funeral.

Following the death of a parent, the teacher must accept a longer period with a reduced capacity for school work. Because of this, the bereaved child might need extra help at a later time, when working capacity becomes normal again. Let the child decide how much he / she wants to talk about what happened, but let the child know that you are willing to listen if he / she comes.

The death of a member of staff:

- If the death happens suddenly and unexpectedly, arrange for a meeting where colleagues can talk through what has happened
- Try to establish continuity in the classroom as soon as possible. The supply teacher or member of staff should be informed properly on how pupils and other staff were affected and which ones were most distressed. This member of staff will require support.