

Guidelines to Kirklees schools on responding to bereavement and developing a bereavement policy



Kirklees Educational Psychology Service

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1. 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 and where schools have spent some time planning and identifying how best to support such students- and have implemented these plans when they are needed - there is clear evidence that the longer term outcomes for these children can be significantly improved.

In some circumstances, a teacher, tutor 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 by anticipating how this can be managed when staff are in shock or upset, schools can be better placed to act effectively and calmly.

Within Kirklees, all schools are being encouraged to consider how best to respond to children who experience bereavement and to develop a policy which sets out clear guidelines for providing support. The role which schools have in supporting their pupils as members of a wider community is significant and the provision of targeted and effective help has been shown to significantly enhance the esteem in which members of the wider community hold the school.

A school which takes time to formalise a response in relation to bereavement or before a critical incident occurs will be much better placed to cope should it need to be put into practice. By being prepared, schools will have the benefit of clear procedures and protocols which can reduce the strain on key members of staff in school and 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.

It is hoped that the present document can support schools in developing a bereavement support framework so that the loss and upset which forms part of many young people's experience can be dealt with in a positive and planned way.

2. How a school can help

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. The following are some helpful things which schools can offer children and young people experiencing loss and grief.

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

It is helpful for a member of school staff to 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

It is helpful to have in school 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 (further details can be found on page 11 of this document).

3. 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. The following are some general guidelines.

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 should 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 OK 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 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 ancillary staff are aware of what has happened. It is particularly helpful to identify someone with whom the child has a good relationship to keep an eye on them.

As soon as possible, preferably before the start of class, a member of staff should 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 is likely to speak 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. It may help to allow them 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.

4. Guidance for all staff on 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 bereaved pupils time. It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of schoolwork. 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.

5. Saying goodbye

Most schools feel that organising some sort of special assembly or remembrance service after a death in a school community is a helpful thing to do. It can put back a sense of normality into what may have been a very unsettled time. Below are some ideas to help you organise something appropriate, however once again the plans should be discussed with the family first.

Why hold a special assembly?

- To bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened
- to reflect on, and remember, the life of the person who has died
- to normalise and share grief
- to give the message that it is OK to be sad but equally OK to be not affected
- to inform pupils and staff of any support that is available

Who should attend?

Anyone who wishes to be there, including teachers and other school staff, pupils, and any families who feel able to do so. In a very large school it may not be possible to get everyone together and a year group assembly might be more appropriate. 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.

Who should be involved?

Anyone who wants to be. Pupils have produced some very moving assemblies about friends who have died. It helps 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.

How to structure a special assembly

Have a clear beginning, middle and an end. Start by explaining 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 could 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, but remember, a large image can be too much for a grieving family
- placing objects associated with the dead person into a special memory box. This can then be given to the family.
- Talking about her memory tree or a collage made by sticking a collection of drawings that pupils have created onto a large sheet of paper or onto a tree outline. This can be added to during the assembly.

The end section needs some thought and is better if it can leave everyone with a sense of looking forward. Some suggestions 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.

Afterwards

It is best to arrange the assembly before a break. Pupils and staff will need space to reflect before carrying on with the normal school timetable. Some schools time it for the end of lessons but the build-up throughout the day can be difficult to handle. If arranged for the end of the school day leave time for pupils to compose themselves before leaving for home. Be prepared for different responses, some pupils may be deeply affected, others not at all, or react with out of character behaviour. Ensure they all know where to go for support if needed.

Resources

Child bereavement charity [www.child bereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

Suggested words to use for an assembly can be found at breaking sad news section in the schools section

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 Heartbeat away by F Lane Fox

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 Cost £10 including post and packaging.

6. How to put together a school policy

A school which takes time to formalise a response before a critical incident or a tragedy occurs will be much better placed to cope should it need to be put into practice. However, every school is different and every situation unique. What is deemed appropriate will vary. The policy should be viewed more as a framework to work around rather than something prescriptive.

Be prepared

- having a policy to work to will greatly help when in shock or upset, especially with sudden or multiple deaths or in traumatic circumstances
- identify key people within the Local Authority (**see Section 7**)
- try to prepare outlines of documents, e.g. letter to parents, in advance

Identify a team, define roles and responsibilities

- Use the expertise within the school and share the responsibilities
- Decide who will take overall charge and designate substitutes should they be absent
- Who will be responsible for communicating with the families directly involved?
- Who will give the news to the rest of the school community?
- If the press are involved, the lead person in school (generally the Headteacher) will need to liaise closely with the local authority Press Officer
- Consider what training may be needed for those involved

Breaking the news to staff, pupils and families

- Obtaining factual information should be made a priority. Think through how this might be done, remembering that contact with those directly involved may be difficult. State in your policy the importance of not making assumptions or repeating what has been heard through rumour. This will only add to distress.
- It is essential that all staff - including those in the front office - are informed straightaway, ideally before pupils
- Identify ways of doing this sensitively. Don't forget part-time and peripatetic staff
- Pupils should be told as soon as possible. This is best done in familiar groups by someone they know. A large school assembly is usually not ideal. Staff may well need guidance on words to use and approach to take. Have something pre-prepared – **Section 4** of this document - **Guidance for all staff on supporting a bereaved pupil** offers a useful framework
- A letter should go to families the same day if possible. A pre-prepared script will be very helpful, it is difficult to find the right words when emotional and in shock.

The first few days

- In your policy, map out the first few days after an incident. It is usually best to have minimum disruption to the timetable, but some flexibility may be required
- Consider what the school approach will be if pupils are too upset to attend lessons. If it is a teacher who has died, what will happen to his/her class?

The funeral

- State in the policy that 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.
- Identify which staff and pupils may want to attend and the practicalities of issues such as staff, and transport. In most cases it is found best that the school remains open for those who do not wish to attend the funeral. Clear guidance on this in the policy will be helpful.
- Will flowers be sent and/or a collection made? Involve staff and pupils in the decision.
- Cultural and religious implications 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. Include a list of outside agencies who may be able to offer help, both short and long term.
- Plan for some sort of 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

- State in your policy the importance of identifying pupils who may be particularly vulnerable, for example anyone who witnessed the death. This could also include those who themselves have recently suffered a bereavement who will be feeling particularly vulnerable.
- Compile (and keep updated) a list of outside professionals and agencies who can come into the school in the event of a traumatic death to counsel pupils.
- 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.
- Identify a suitable place in school for pupils who need some space if they are too upset to stay in the classroom and people to whom they can go for support. It is helpful to give them the name of more than one person in school and to allow them to choose who they feel most able to speak to.

Remembering

This can be difficult to plan in advance but careful thought is required. The dead person's family need to be consulted. Schools often find that an assembly that takes the form of a celebration of life is appropriate (see **Section 5 - Saying Goodbye**)

7. 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

Employee Health Care, Kirklees: Tel. 01484 221000 employee.healthcare@kirklees.gov.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
www.childbereavementuk.org Tel 01494 568900 (9.00 to 5.00 weekdays)

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

Samaritans – Suicide Prevention Response Line – 020 8394 8382

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The Educational Psychology Service is grateful to the Child Bereavement Charity UK for permission to include information which is contained in the guidance pack for schools which they have produced. The full set of 22 fact sheets can be obtained from www.childbereavement.org.uk and includes sections on supporting parents and carers and an extensive guide to books and resources. Cost £10. A range of free information sheets can also be downloaded from their website and the helpline number they provide is 01494 568900.