

## **GRIEF SUPPORT GUIDANCE FOR INFANT AND JUNIOR SCHOOLS**

### **Introduction**

This guide is designed as a quick read to help staff in primary schools respond to a bereaved student in as helpful a way as possible. This guidance includes:

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A teacher in a primary school is all but certain to encounter during their career students who have been deeply affected by bereavement. 3% of 5- to 15-year-olds have experienced the death of a parent or sibling and many others have lost grandparents. It is suggested that 92% of children in the UK will experience bereavement before the age of 16, through the loss of a person or pet. The universality of bereavement is clear. Young people look to peers and teachers in their schools to help define the reality of their losses, provide support and help integrate the experience into their lives. The teacher and the school itself have a potentially major role to play in supporting the child.

Close bereavements bring profound effects and changes to a child's life. Young children can suffer very deeply. One way of understanding it is that first the child will have to face this loss and accept its reality, experience the pain, adjust to the environment from which the deceased is missing and finally relocate this person within their lives and find ways to memorialise them. There is no fixed pattern to how a child will grieve and how this will show itself in school.

### **Effects of Bereavement**

Many factors determine the response to the bereavement, the closeness of the relationship being perhaps the most important and the degree of attachment. The precise nature of the death, the support available and the cultural and religious background all play an important part. It is important to say that many children will cope well or appear to cope well.

A child who has suffered a significant bereavement is liable to suffer various effects from the grief they experience. At a physical level there may be tiredness, even exhaustion, disturbances to their sleep, possibly nightmares. Various physical symptoms may emerge, e.g. stomach and headaches, skin disorders, all as a reaction to the stress and grief precipitated by the loss. Changes in care patterns can cause some form of neglect that may compound their difficulties. It is important to realise that the effects described both in this paragraph and the following one are quite normal. It is when there is a persistence and an intensity in them that a referral may be necessary.

The profound consequences at an emotional level of, for example, losing a parent or a sibling, or even a grandparent, can at the earlier stages cause shock, numbness, great anxiety (possibly generalized but may be focused on the fear of losing another family member, especially a parent). There can be crying, sadness and vulnerability, a sense of being overwhelmed. The child may express the strangest concerns and fears that may shock. Children bereaved of a parent will feel different. There can be profound anger, perhaps at the unfairness of the loss. Even in a junior school child there can be suicidal thoughts, so intensely is the loss felt. Depression, loneliness and withdrawal are other possibilities. The compounding of problems is a distinct possibility, particularly in children already on the SEN Register. Guilt and self-reproach are other possible emotional reactions, sometimes with younger children who may believe that something they did caused the death, a form of magical thinking most common amongst young children. Self-esteem is liable to be challenged by the loss of any source of positive approval and love.

Disruptive behaviour is a possibility, greater restlessness, a desire for attention, uncharacteristic outbursts, even self-harming. Attendance may be affected. It is also quite possible that a child may grow in emotional intelligence as they cope with the difficulties of their situation. A significant minority of children struggle to retain their previous functioning and well-being after the death of a parent.

Younger children will experience intense grief only briefly at any given moment. They tend to 'puddle jump' with their feelings and activities. Children can be eager to return to normal activities. In older junior school children the process of grieving takes a different shape, there is a greater ability to think abstractly, to reason and see cause and effect, and

emotional expression may be muted and sporadic. There is an age appropriate avoidance of feelings, and school can be a helpful distraction.

### **Effects on Learning**

Most children facing significant bereavement are likely to experience some effect on their cognitive functioning. Disturbing memories or fantasies can affect concentration and memory. Stress can make it hard to process information. Difficult mood states can overwhelm a student's ability to self-regulate, and this can lead to disruptive behaviour, causing further educational loss.

Bereavement can lead to regression and perception of self as helpless and inadequate. Clearly this links to self-esteem as well. This can affect a child's self-image as a learner, and they may not even attempt the task. If a child is anxious, their information processing is restricted, and they cannot concentrate, being so preoccupied with their anxiety. Subjects with an intense cognitive focus are perhaps more likely to be affected, for example Maths and Science as opposed to PE. Emotional turmoil and disruptive thinking can have a disruptive effect on progress.

### **Other Considerations**

Other students can sometimes find the grieving student difficult to cope with, and the very profound emotions that child may be experiencing may be threatening and frightening to other children as well as, of course, themselves. In a junior school classroom, this whole effect is even more intense because of the amount of time spent together.

Grief is a process, not a state. Grief will also be revisited over time as the child matures. It is suggested that children understand death is universal by age 5 or 6 and what causes it slightly later. Understanding personal mortality does not reliably emerge until 8 or 9. A complete understanding of universality, irreversibility, non-functionality and personal mortality is present by age 10. Teachers of younger children especially need to be aware that they may not have a full understanding of death or the language to adequately express their feelings.

It is helpful to be aware of the nature of the legacy a child has taken on from the deceased. For some it can be very positive, for others difficult or uncomfortable. We cannot always assume a positive set of memories in relation to the deceased when talking to a child.

Sometimes their grief may be complicated and their memories of the person may have deep emotional ambivalence. The same caution as when talking to the child may apply equally in our dealings with the family. Sudden deaths generally have the potential to cause trauma for the child. Suicide, accidents of any kind and sudden death of any sort often leaves a particularly difficult legacy.

The secondary effects of bereavement can be huge. With the death of a parent there may be financial difficulties, a need to move house, to find new ways of coping; there will be the profound challenge for a family of having to face a radically different reality with all the material and psychological adjustments necessary. School can be one consistent area that can help to support and normalise a child's experience at a time of great inner and outer turmoil.

### **What to Do in the Early Stages**

- In the event of a close bereavement, it is suggested that contacting the family before the child returns to school is best and, if possible, visiting them at home.
- It is best if just one person is the link to the family.
- Being aware of their religious and cultural beliefs is important.
- It is valuable to clarify with the parent or carer what information they want to be shared with staff or children concerning the death.
- Check out the facts, and familiarise yourself with the circumstances surrounding the death.
- It is also helpful to establish with the parent what the child knows about the death, because this can have significant bearing on their future mourning and possibly on their behaviour in school.
- Having discussed any relevant issues relating to the child and the death, it is also useful to establish when the funeral is and who might be attending. In some special cases teachers may want to attend the funeral to support the child and family.

- If a child is away for some time messages home from classmates can be very supportive.
- The teacher needs to talk to the student to establish who should say what to their classmates and to see what immediate support they might need. Some students will want to talk to the class as well themselves.
- It is important to make a formal expression of condolence on behalf of the school, be it a card, letter and/or flowers. (This applies to parental or sibling bereavement especially).

### **Returning to School**

- *All staff need to be informed of the death and given any key information*\_(again this applies to parental or sibling bereavement especially).
- The return to school can be difficult for a child after a close bereavement.
- Be prepared to repeat things, as the child is almost certainly in a state of shock and some confusion.
- It might be politic to inform all parents in the class of the bereavement, since children may well be carrying various questions and emotions home.
- It is important sometimes for staff to enlist support from more senior staff, for example in talking to the family.
- When the child returns to school, it is important that their normal routines be maintained as far as possible, to help give normality and support them at a time of what is often great confusion.
- If a child is suffering from PTSD, returning to normal school routines may put too great a strain on their resources.
- Flexibility in attendance arrangements may be helpful, with possibly a phased return or a reduced timetable. Flexibility in work expectations may be necessary for reasons already described.
- It is important to be aware of anniversaries (date of death and birthdays), because a child will often feel especially vulnerable on these days.
- It is important to maintain regular contact with the child's home. Sometimes a phone call home is valuable.

- A time-out pass to go to a quiet place / speak to a trusted adult is helpful.
- It can be helpful for children to phone home to see that things are okay there. Separation anxiety can be very intense when a parent has died.
- Directly enlisting peer support helps to offset feelings of isolation.
- One study of bereaved children reported that listening, counselling and acknowledgement were the three things the child would have liked most in school at the time of their bereavement. The teacher being available to listen and talk, providing reassurance and normality, is the important key, and for most children this provides a solid base for support. Preparing the class to be supportive is valuable.

### **Some Specific Ways of Helping Through the Curriculum**

There are specific ways that a teacher can reach out to a child and help them to express their feelings, comfort them and generally support them.

After the earlier post-bereavement stages, there are many ways that a child can be supported, e.g. through the use of pocket comforters, secret diaries and happy/sad faces. A flexible perspective is needed, and paying attention to a young person's reality is the key. The child needs time, and a teacher needs to consider that the process of helping the child may be a lengthy one.

Bereaved children need release from tension, for example for younger children through play, for boys especially through physical activity, listening to music, being taught appropriate ways to express anger.

The arts can be a means of expressing and working through feelings. Drama is considered especially appropriate for older juniors. Depending on a child's preferred means of expression, activities such as writing poems or stories, drawing or painting, clay modelling or musical expression can all be helpful. Sometimes a child may need to fixate on a particular task to work through something, sometimes as a form of memorialising.

Flexibility with the curriculum may be needed. Dedicated help from support staff may allow the carrying out of certain more therapeutic activities, or any one of a number of activities to help facilitate emotional expression.

Bibliotherapy is another valuable approach, in which bereaved children 'locate their grief in the interaction between themselves and the text'. The teacher can assist by pointing the child in the direction of particular texts. Children are capable of deep creative expression in

words even before they have acquired the skills of reading and writing, so younger children are not necessarily barred from this approach.

The use of Memory Boxes and Salt Jars may be helpful or any appropriate form of memorialisation. Supporting the child's self-esteem is very important, and many of the activities described offer a means of praise and validation. Sometimes it is important to remind the child it is okay to have fun despite everything that is going on in their lives; this is an important part of their healing. One study ranked in descending order the following post-bereavement problems in junior school: anger/disruptive behaviour, crying, withdrawal, loss of concentration, distress, sadness. Children need reassurance that their feelings are acceptable, as well as support and understanding with those that pose a challenge to the atmosphere and functioning of the class.

PSHE and RE can offer whole-school approaches to considering loss and bereavement and ways of building empathy within the class. *Good Grief* (Ward, 1996) is a helpful source of ideas. It's important to remember some curriculum content may be difficult for a bereaved child. The provision of group counselling and peer support groups can be considered if there are several bereaved children in the school. The bullying of bereaved children is at times deeply callous and can become a subtle and unpleasant feature of their lives.

Education in this area becomes more relevant by KS2, because then children mostly understand death is irreversible, although it doesn't mean that it can't be talked about earlier. Bereavement fits into three National Healthy School standard themes and thus is part of PSHE and Citizenship. There should be a lightness of touch, and death should be picked up from the subject matter already being taught. One obvious example is in KS2 with the topic of ancient Egyptians, which looks at the process of mummification. The aim is to naturalistically introduce death as a subject into the curriculum as an ordinary part of life, in the hope that this also might be a way of helping with the more distressing situation where a child has been bereaved.

Both Job and Frances (2004) and Jackson and Colwell (2002) offer thoughts on different approaches to the curriculum across a variety of subject areas, including English, Science (for example, the life cycle and the value of pets in KS1 and KS2 classrooms), Art, Geography, Music and History. The point Jackson and Colwell make is that discussion comes from the material almost spontaneously. As Job and Frances say, there may be no legal obligation placed on schools to address issues of death and bereavement, but there are compelling reasons why they should do so. Bereaved children, in particular, of all ages, have many questions about death and dying.

## **Looking After Yourself**

Dealing with a grieving child can be a difficult process, and the issue of proper self-care and receiving adequate support is important for managing one's workload and supporting the child appropriately.

## **Contacts**

**For support or training for your school or to refer a family to Jigsaw4u, please contact:**

**SW London - Mitcham office – 0208 6871384**

**NW England - Newton Le Willows office – 07977 441080**

**SE England - East Grinstead office – 01342 313895**

## **Acknowledgement**

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