

Grief Support Guidance for Secondary Schools

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

- Introduction
- Effects of Bereavement
- Grief in Young People aged 11- 14 and 14 plus
- General Points
- What To Do in the Early Stages
- Returning to School
- Other Ways of Helping
- Looking after Yourself
- Contacts

Teachers in secondary schools are likely to deal with a range of students who have suffered significant bereavements. 3% of 5- to 15-year-olds have experienced the death of a parent or sibling. 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 will look to peers and teachers in their schools to help define the reality of their losses, including providing support and access to information and helping them integrate the experience into their lives. The teacher and the school itself have a potentially major role to play in supporting the young person.

Close bereavements bring profound effects and changes to a young person's life. One way of understanding it is that first the young person 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. These tasks of mourning are not necessarily sequential and may take years. The bonds with a loved one continue over time, and a young person can be deeply affected for years.

Effects of Bereavement

A young person 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, 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. Young people bereaved of a parent will feel different. There can be profound anger, perhaps at the unfairness of the loss. 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. Self-esteem is liable to be challenged by the loss of any source of positive approval and love. Their world has been turned upside down. Disruptive behaviour is a possibility, greater restlessness, the desire for attention, even self-harming. Attendance may be affected. It is also quite possible that a young person may grow in emotional intelligence as they cope with the difficulties of their situation.

A significant minority of young people struggle to retain their previous functioning and well-being after the death of a parent and, one or even two years later, can still be suffering adverse effects. Most young people facing significant bereavement are likely to experience some effect on their cognitive functioning. One study of the secondary age range found that parental or sibling bereavement significantly depressed GCSE scores, as well as leading to a rise in anxiety.

With regard to cognitive functioning, it is considered that trauma and loss are often followed by depression, and this causes a slowing down of the cognitive functions. 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.

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.

Young people can show their grief in one way at one time, and as they move through it in a different way at another, sometimes within the same day. Grief will also be revisited over time as a young person matures.

Grief in Young People aged 11 to 14

Boys

Increase in conflict with teachers
Unable to talk
Preoccupation/apathy
Often cry alone
Can't rely on peers for emotional support
Drop in self-esteem and concentration

Girls

Eating issues
Moodiness
Sadness
Cry with peers
Talk more with peers

Can conceal and avoid their experience of grief

Both boys and girls

Temporary decline in school performance for many students
Seeking control of grief through outside activities
Exaggerated behavioural reactions
Grief more episodic than adults
Trying to control overwhelming emotions
Grief can be very frightening for the adolescent (unknown emotions).

Grief in Young People aged 14 plus

Many factors as above *but*:

- More adult and complex process
- Persistent grief
- Grief takes energy and attention, particularly affects cognitive problem solving
- A marked temporary change in school performance can happen after a major bereavement (can be longer for some)

General points

Most students will regain normal functioning (in school) within a matter of months. Those on the SEN Register are more vulnerable. For some students the bereavement may cause profound difficulties, so that even after one or two years they are still deeply affected. For all students who suffer a close bereavement, it has the power to influence their sense of self and emotional well-being for years to come.

Teachers need to be aware of the nature of the legacy a young person 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. Sometimes the grief may be complicated, and their memories of the person may have deep emotional

ambivalence. The same caution in this respect as when talking to the young person may apply equally in our dealings with the family.

Generally, children have a greater likelihood of being bereaved of their father rather than of their mother. The secondary effects are often huge, for example having to move house or school, loss of a principal carer, emotional support or income and more strained and conflictual relationships. The science in this field cannot offer easy generalisations here, because each situation is so individual. School can be one consistent area that can help to support and normalise a young person's experience at a time of great inner and outer turmoil.

Sudden deaths generally have the potential to cause trauma for the student. One extreme example is suicide. Others involve some kind of accident. These deaths often cause the most painful of legacies and can cause lingering grief/distress for many years.

What To Do in the Early Stages

- In the event of a close bereavement, it is suggested that contacting the family before the young person 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 young people, 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 young person knows about the death, because this can have significant bearing on their future mourning and possible behaviour in school.
- Having discussed any relevant issues relating to the young person and the death, it is also useful to establish when the funeral is and who might be attending. There are occasions when staff may want to attend the funeral.
- 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 themselves and tell them about the death.

- If a student is away for some time, messages from classmates can be a very supportive gesture.
- It is important to make a formal expression of condolence on behalf of the school, be it a card, a letter and/or flowers, when the death is one that impinges more directly (e.g. parent or sibling especially)

Returning to School

- All staff need to be informed of the death and given any key information.
- The return to school can be very difficult for a young person after a close bereavement.
- Be prepared to repeat things, as the young person is almost certainly in a state of shock and some confusion.
- It might be politic in some instances to inform all parents in the tutor class of the bereavement, since the young people may well be carrying various questions and emotions home (only of course if the family wish this to happen).
- Maintain normal routines, to help give normality and support.
- If a child is suffering from PTSD, quickly 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 and/or reduced days.
- A time-out pass to go to a quiet place or speak to a trusted adult is helpful.

- Preparing the class to be supportive is valuable. Directly enlisting peer support may be necessary for some students, helping to offset feelings of isolation.
- One study of bereaved young people 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 young people this provides a solid base for support.

Other Ways of Helping

After the earlier post-bereavement stages, there are many ways that a child can be supported. A flexible perspective is needed, and paying attention to a young person's reality is the key. The young person needs time, and a teacher needs to consider that the process of helping them may be a lengthy one. It's important to be aware of anniversaries. It is important to maintain regular contact with the home as well. Bereaved children need release from tension, for example 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 potentially valuable. Depending on a young person'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 young person 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.

The use of Memory Boxes and Salt Jars may be helpful, or any appropriate form of memorialisation. Supporting the young person's self-esteem is very important, and many of the activities described offer a means of praise and validation. This is especially important at a time when their sense of worth may have taken a deep knock.

Young people 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. It's important to remember that 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.



Extra support in school, if dedicated in the earlier stages of grief, may well be a helpful preventive measure. There is evidence to suggest that EBD problems can be prevented and schools may play a crucial role in determining whether such difficulties arise or not. Early intervention to maintain success in learning bolsters self-esteem.

Sometimes the bereavement is used as a means to abuse the student. This is most evident with young people who already have social difficulties. On occasions peers can be painfully callous.

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 young person 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 – 07977441080

SE England - East Grinstead office – 01342313895

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