

SUPPORTING SCHOOLS TO EFFECTIVELY MANAGE BEREAVEMENT



Schools are nurturing, bonded communities, and the death of a pupil, a parent or care giver or a member of school staff can have a profound effect on the whole school community. When facing bereavement, school communities can come together to provide support and comfort to all affected. There is no absolute right or wrong to doing this; no convenient step-by-step template to follow in every set of circumstances. Every death will be different; some expected, some not; some due to illness, some after an accident; some will be the death of a person active in the school community every day, some will be the death of a person who is more distant from the day to day activities of the school.

There are basic principles and actions which can help schools to respond effectively to bereavement, and these are set out in this information sheet. Schools might find it useful to think in terms of immediate actions that need to happen, followed by longer term actions which will help to maintain effective support networks.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Contact with the bereaved family

Identify a member of staff as the main contact for the bereaved family. They should then get in touch with the family as soon as possible to offer support and to discuss how the school community is going to be told about the bereavement. Information gets round quickly via a range of different sources, so agreeing a plan for information disclosure with the family helps to keep the information factual and allows the family a level of control. Some families may not want all the facts to be made known, but it can be more distressing in the long run if the information 'doing the rounds' is not accurate.

Staying in touch

The key contact then needs to stay in touch with the family so that they know the school community has them in their thoughts and so that they are kept up to date about what is happening at school.

Informing staff team

Call a staff meeting and give the information about the death as agreed with the pupil and their family. The key contact will lead this meeting. In doing this, be aware of the impact on some staff for whom the news may be particularly upsetting. Some staff may have had recent bereavements within their own family or social network, they may have been particularly close to the pupil affected, may know the person who has died etc. Some caregivers who ask for our support want to know how best to explain complicated causes of death (such as suicide, or drugs-related death).



External stakeholder liaison

If the death is 'newsworthy', identify a lead staff member who will be responsible for liaison with the press, the school governors, the Local Education Authority, partner agencies etc. Ideally this should be a different member of staff to the lead person liaising with the family.

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Informing pupils

Once staff have been informed, inform all pupils. This will vary from school to school in terms of how it's done. Large schools might opt for pupils being told in tutor groups; smaller schools might opt for a whole school approach, so that everyone receives exactly the same information at the same time. In all cases, and as far as possible, pupils should be told by a staff member that they know and already have a trusting relationship with. Staff should use simple, clear and straightforward language which doesn't create confusion. Staff might find it helpful to 'practice' this beforehand with colleagues or by contacting Balloons.

Pupils who are particularly affected

As a follow up to informing the whole pupil body, it might be helpful to give extra support away from the main group to those pupils who are particularly affected by the bereavement. This would include friends of the pupil directly affected, but could also include pupils who have recently had a bereavement of their own to cope with, or who have someone terminally ill within their family and friendship group.



Answering pupil's questions

Pupils must be allowed the time to process the information that they have been given and to ask questions. Again, school staff might want to spend some time preparing for this, either by supporting each other or by talking to someone from Balloons. Ideally, staff will feel free to acknowledge their own upset with their pupils, and to role model that grieving after bereavement is a natural and important process. Staff should make it clear that pupils can continue to talk about the bereavement, to ask questions and to share concerns. It's also important to note that no one has the answers to all of the questions – and it's OK for staff to say – 'I don't know the answer to that myself'.



Informing parents & carers

If it is appropriate, and as long as the bereaved family have been made aware, the school might want to send a letter home to parents and carers to let them know what has happened. Again, this helps to ensure that only accurate information goes out to the extended school community. This should include information about what the school is doing as follow up after the bereavement, how pupils are being supported, and what parents and carers can do to help.

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LONGER TERM ACTIONS AND IMPACTS

Holding an assembly or memorial service at school

It can be helpful to bring the whole school together in an act of remembrance or reflection for the person who has died. The event might involve - lighting a candle, playing the person's favourite music or reading their favourite poem, reading poetry or prose specially written by other pupils, displaying a collage about the person made by pupils, making a memory book or box to honour the person, making a tribute or friendship tree (draw the outline of a tree and then staff and pupils can write their memories on the 'blossoms' or 'leaves' and attach them to the branches).

Try and make sure that the event ends on a positive note. This might involve agreeing to organise a fundraising event in school for a relevant charity. Make sure that staff and pupils all know where to get support after the event. If a pupil has died, their work and people's memories can be displayed in school and then offered to the family.

Repeated questioning

Bad news is sometimes hard to take in first time round, and pupils may want to go over information more than once, and may ask the same questions more than once. Be prepared to answer questions repeatedly, and as far as possible ensure consistency of explanation amongst the staff team. Questions from pupils may continue long after the death occurred.

Messages of condolence

Arrange for staff/pupils who wish to, to send cards, messages, drawings etc. to the bereaved pupil and family, having agreed in advance with the family the best way of doing this. This can help the pupils to feel connected to what is happening and to feel that they are doing something positive. It can also send a message of support to the family and help them to feel included in the school community.



Changes in pupil behaviour

It is very common after a bereavement that pupil's may exhibit changes to their usual behaviour and behave 'out of character'. This can be short term and an immediate response to the bereavement, or it can be longer term, especially if there are other mitigating factors involved such as another expected bereavement coming up. In particular, the pupil/s directly affected by the death may exhibit changing behaviours. Make sure that staff are talking as a team about this and about how best to respond. Changes in behaviour are generally an indication that a pupil is still processing grief and it's best to be honest with them – name the fact that their behaviours have changed and check what can be done to help and support them so that changing behaviours don't negatively impact on academic progress, friendships etc.

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Continuing to recognise the impact of the bereavement

Strong school communities know that an immediate response to a bereavement should not be followed up by cessation in talking about it or remembering the person who has died. Acknowledge the ongoing impact on the school community. Schools will want to maintain a secure and consistent routine for their pupils, and will of course have to continue delivering the taught curriculum, but it's also worth finding ways to honour the fact that grieving is a long-term process, and there will be good days and bad days for all those affected. If appropriate, use books and activities to help pupils to explore feelings and concepts about death. Balloons staff can help with this.

Lasting memorials

Depending on the death and the circumstances surrounding it, some schools may feel it appropriate to develop a lasting memorial for the person who has died. As a collective community response to catastrophic bereavement, this can be very healing. If considering this, the immediate family must be involved in the first instance so that any memorial has their permission and ideally their involvement.

Significant dates

Try to make a note of all the relevant significant dates that may be difficult for the pupil and family as time goes by. These will include the anniversary of the death, birthdays etc. Ensure all relevant staff are aware of these dates and best placed to provide support.



MANAGING A BEREAVED PUPIL'S RETURN TO SCHOOL

Welcoming a pupil back to school after a bereavement needs to be managed sensitively. For some pupils they will have had an intense period of time with their family, and will have had a sense of safety and normality whilst being surrounded by others who are also grieving. It can be very frightening to 're-enter' the school community that has from their perspective carried on as usual after the bereavement.

Some pupils will struggle with separation anxiety when the time comes to return to school. For others the familiarity, stability and routines of school life may prompt an early return.

Every pupil will be unique, but commonly pupils may have some concerns when they return to school. On the following page we have given a few examples along with some suggested actions that can be taken to help with these.

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CONCERN

Sense of being 'different' and isolated.

ACTION

Try to ensure that staff don't repeatedly single out the pupil for special attention, even if the motivations for doing this are positive. Try to let the pupil lead in terms of how they want to be supported so that they don't feel like the spotlight is always on them. Talk to them.

CONCERN

How will staff and peers react to the loss – who has been told, what do they know, what will be said, how much will they have to tell people?

ACTION

Meet with pupil in advance of their return, along with parent/carer, and make sure that everyone understands exactly what has been said and who knows what etc.

CONCERN

Fear of sudden emotional and potentially embarrassing outbursts such as anger, crying, panic attacks.

ACTION

Agree strategies for managing upset in the classroom, such as an 'exit card' system and an identified 'safe place' that the pupil can go to and someone they can talk to.

CONCERN

Unable to meet homework/project deadlines because of altered responsibilities within the family and home.

ACTION

Where possible, build in flexibility. Support the pupil to work out priorities and if possible give additional support such as in a homework club setting

CONCERN

Fear of being behind with work and unable to catch up.

ACTION

Talk to pupil and together agree priorities – what is essential and what can be left. If extra support can be offered to catch up then explore that, but ensure it doesn't create extra pressure for the pupil

CONCERN

Inability to concentrate and sit still or to feel motivated.

ACTION

Give reassurance that this is very common and usually passes with time. Note that pupils might often not be sleeping or eating well. Talk about possible strategies for coping with this such as breaking tasks down into small chunks, building in frequent 'fidget breaks', having frequent small snacks in school etc.

CONCERN

Worries about forthcoming exams.

ACTION

Give reassurance, extra support and where appropriate notify examination boards to agree mitigation)

ABOVE ALL – CELEBRATE EVERY SUCCESS, NO MATTER HOW SMALL, AND TRY TO MINIMISE FAILURES.

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TOP TIPS WHEN SUPPORTING A BEREAVED PUPIL

- Be there for them as a source of support and a comforting presence
- Be flexible, bespoke and creative in terms of the support you offer
- Expect them to be inconsistent in their grief – this is a very common pattern for children and young people
- Listen carefully to what they are telling you without judgement, and respect and honour their feelings as far as possible. Know that the pupil has to process their grief in their own time and at their own pace. Be patient with them
- Give the pupil choices so that they feel at least partly in control
- Look out for isolation from their peer group, which commonly happens after bereavement. Try to respond swiftly if you see this starting to happen
- Sit with them in their silence if silence is what they need. A supportive presence can sometimes say what words cannot
- Encourage the expression of feelings and emotions and show that there is strength in naming sadness and despair. Seek specialist support for the pupil if you are genuinely worried about their ability to cope. Talk to Balloons about a possible referral for grief support
- Create appropriate opportunities for remembering the person who has died
- Try to ensure that the pupil is having fun – children need to have a break from grief. Don't assume they won't want to do any of the fun things that make up school life. Reassure them that having fun is good and does not mean that they are being disloyal to the person who has died
- Believe in the pupil, and in their ability to recover and grow with time and support
- Ensure that your school has received appropriate childhood grief training and support. Talk to Balloons about this

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Looking after yourself is vital. Supporting a bereaved pupil in your school can be very stressful. The bereavement can have resonances for you too. Remember that you are not responsible for the pupil's grief; you can't take it away or 'solve' it for them. What you can do is offer support, and that's very important. Read up on and seek training about childhood grief. Talk to people about how you are feeling and be a role model for the fact that being open about grief is healthy. Know that there are limits to what you can do and that this doesn't make you a bad person or an inadequate professional. Take time for yourself!

FURTHER SUPPORT

Make contact with Balloons to talk about any of the issues in this leaflet further. We can recommend further reading and specific ways of responding to bereavements in your school community. We offer professional training to staff groups. We'd love to hear from you and to work in partnership with you as you grow as a learning community best able to respond to childhood grief.