

Richard Cloudesley School

Loss and Bereavement Policy

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This Policy includes information taken from.....

Introduction

Bereavement and Grief

It is almost inevitable that within any community of young people, there will be some who experience the death or the loss of someone close to them. In such circumstances, adults have a vital role to play in supporting the young person as they go through the distressing but very natural and essential process of grieving. This booklet provides information about bereavement and grief in children and young people, its possible impact on learning and behaviour and how staff in early years' settings, primary and secondary schools, residential and alternative homes might help and support such pupils.

Critical Incidents

Sometimes schools and other institutions for children and young people are faced with having to deal with devastating events which occur on or near the premises, and which involve or are witnessed by children or staff. Such events, occurring outside our normal life experiences, for example, murder, accidents, multiple deaths or violent acts, are referred to as critical incidents. Critical incidents are likely to leave staff and young people shocked, distressed and traumatised. It is helpful in these instances to be prepared with an effective response protocol and to be aware of the appropriate LA personnel with whom to be in contact. The later part of this booklet will address some of the specific issues around critical incidents but much of the general advice and strategies suggested earlier will be relevant in acknowledging and responding to the distress of the children and young people affected by a tragic event.

Loss and Bereavement

The Loss Experience

We can approach the subject of bereavement through recognition and an understanding of the loss experiences that inevitably occur in our own lives. Research indicates that unless loss is recognised and acknowledged, then future loss events may become a source of stress rather than a potential for growth (Ward, 1989). It is helpful, therefore, to connect the theory of loss with our own personal experiences and the emotions which occur throughout our lives and how these change over time (Lost for Words, 2005).

Children and young people can experience loss and bereavement in many different circumstances. It is important to have an awareness of this when considering the emotional well-being of the pupils in school, settings and residential establishments. The death of a pet, the loss of a favoured toy, a change in class, a friend moving away, are all examples of common and natural loss experiences. An increasing number of children are adversely affected by divorce and family separation; an experience which can be as painful and as hurtful as a bereavement through death. Looked after children and young people, refugee and asylum-seeking children and those who have a parent in prison, may all be especially vulnerable to feelings of loss. These feelings might be closely related to issues of attachment, following placement disruptions, adoption breakdowns, removal from families, and loss of contact with parents etc.

Loss is associated with change. Changes occur around us all the time, yet loss is usually only acknowledged in more extreme cases, such as death and divorce. Our ability to cope with major loss in our lives can be influenced by the coping strategies developed in response to earlier life experiences (Brown, 1999). Preparing for loss and bereavement should be seen as a normal and healthy part of growing up.

The impact of loss and the grief subsequently experienced can be understood more fully by referring to the work of Bowlby (1969) who wrote about the human need for security and safety which results in a loving bond being made with another person. This bond is known as an "attachment". A grief response will occur if

this bond is broken or changed in any way. The intensity of the response will depend on past experiences and the degree of the attachment.

Bereavement can be described as “*the loss of something that is precious*”. As well as the loss of a person, Ward (1969) incorporates in this definition, inanimate objects, change in a particular situation and the ending of relationships. It is helpful to be aware that bereavement in a young person’s life is sometimes compounded by other unavoidable changes and consequent losses, such as, a school or house move, a stay with relatives, a significant change in financial status, etc. Regular movements as a result of redeployment or the temporary loss of a parent who is deployed on operations are additional issues that might commonly affect the children of armed services families.

Children’s understanding of death

A developmental approach

The research evidence suggests that children have some understanding of death from an early age. Understanding does of course vary with age, experience, developmental or cognitive level, personality and familiar circumstances. Children’s experience of bereavement is as painful as adults, but there may be differences in how they respond. Adults grieve intensely and consistently, whereas children and young people can be distracted from their grief. They tend to experience periods of intense emotion alongside their more usual moods. This does not, however, mean that children’s grieving is superficial.

Having an awareness of how a child or young person might understand death or dying can make it easier for an adult to help or support a bereaved child. A child’s questions and observations about death and dying will reflect the level of their understanding. It is thought that a conceptual understanding of death follows the same developmental sequence in most children even if this occurs at different rates or stages in their maturity (Dyregrov, 2002).

It may be useful for adults in school to reflect on what is meant by a mature or accurate understanding of death and how this relates to the understanding and experiences of the children and young person in their care.

Research suggest that there are four essential components to a mature understanding of death:

Irreversibility – understanding that the physical body of a dead creature cannot come back to life and so death involves permanent separation.

Finality - understanding that life-defining bodily functions cease after death; that a dead person cannot move, does not breathe, speak, go to the toilet and is unable to see, hear, smell, think, feel or dream.

Inevitability - the understanding that death is universal and that *all* living things die; that death will affect all people including oneself (i.e. everyone will die, irrespective of race, status, money, country, gender, age).

Causality - the understanding of the possible physical and biological causes of death (e.g. illness, accident, violence, war, natural disaster, old age etc).

There are many factors which might influence the development and understand of these death concepts in children and young people, such as, age, cognitive ability, emotional maturity, exposure to discussion, cultural norms and exceptions and direct experience of death or dying. Some of the concepts involved are noted to be more complex and challenging to understand (e.g. finality). As a guide however, the research evidence indicates that children are able to understand some components of death from as young as five, but are unlikely to fully comprehend all components until about nine or ten years of age.

The information below provides guidance regarding children and young people's understanding of death at different ages. However, when considering this, it is also important to take into account the child's developmental level alongside their chronological age.

0 – 4 years (emergent understanding)

At this age, children are egocentric and the importance of "me" is paramount. Children at this stage are interested in the immediate rather than in the future or the past. Children's thinking in their early years is at a concrete, literal level. It is especially important at this stage therefore, not to use abstract terms or euphemisms (such as "gone to sleep" or "gone away" for example) as these may cause confusion or anxiety. Be prepared to give repeated explanations as the child comes to terms and tries to understand what has happened and to respond to misconceptions a young child might have. Children of this age are unlikely to have developed the concepts detailed above and so will have little idea that death is permanent. Separation or abandonment may be their primary feeling. A child of this age may be curious about what happens in death, such as how the dead person keeps warm, eats or drinks (not understanding "finality") and ask questions accordingly. Very young children can appear to take things in their stride. This is not to underestimate, however, the powerful reactions they may have.

4 – 8 years (limited understanding)

As children develop and learn more about their world, they begin to understand that death is permanent. It is around the age of 7 years that normally developing children are thought to accept the permanence of death and that it can happen to anyone (Child Bereavement Trust, 2005). Children become aware that death has a cause – illness, accident, violence, etc and that it happens to all living things. Children of this age may be interested in the facts about what has happened, are still likely to be concrete in their thinking and may use "magical thinking" (i.e. the belief that they can make things happen e.g. bring the dead person back to life). They may act out rituals associated with death, such as playing funerals, making tombstones etc. Children's egocentricity diminishes at this age, so that they become more aware of the feelings of others and are able to show empathy and compassion. As a result, although they are more able to express their thoughts and feelings, bereaved children may suppress their own grief in consideration of others.

8 – 12 years (mature understanding)

From around 8 to early adolescent, children and young people begin to develop a more mature understanding of the components of death (although "magical thinking" may still play a role). Children at this age are able to think in more abstract terms and appreciate the longer term implications and consequences of death. With this realisation, however, comes an understanding of their own morality, which can give rise to fear and anxiety. Children and young people at this stage still require many opportunities to talk and ask questions.

Adolescence (accurate understanding)

By adolescence, most young people have an accurate understanding of death and dying.

At times, death may seem distant and at other times it may seem frighteningly close. The prospect of their own death becomes more of a reality and a fear of non-existence can pervade. Some bereaved teenagers may feel the need to test their own morality by engaging in risk-taking behaviours. Others may be vulnerable to depression or anxiety.

It is important for adults to be sensitive to the peer and social pressures that exist during the teenage years. A feeling that others do not know how to respond, may result in a young person suppressing their grief in order to ensure conformity and remain accepted and included within their school or community. Conversely, some bereaved teenagers may find comfort and solace within their peer group rather than their family and may become outwardly challenging of the expectations of the adults around them.

The process of grieving

Adults can help children and young people through the process of grieving by providing age appropriate, factually accurate explanations, using clear language about death. As a result, fears or confusions are minimised. Children are less likely to create fantasies which may be worse than the reality and may compound the distress. Explanations may need to be repeated as children and young people can take time to assimilate difficult information.

The grieving process will be different for each individual. Whilst there are no times scales and no fixed ways in which we should grieve, similarities in the way individuals (both adults and children) respond to bereavement have been identified. The elements of grieving are commonly described as:

Early grief

At this stage there may be shock, disbelief and denial. The bereaved may continue to behave as if the dead person is still alive.

Acute grief

This may be described as the “disorganisation” phase. The bereaved may experience guilt, anxiety, despair, depression, anger, grief in relation to the death.

Subsiding grief

At this stage, the bereaved person gradually begins to accept the death and begins to move on. This does not mean that the feelings of loss or sadness disappear or that the deceased person is forgotten.

Grieving

Children are affected by their own grief, the grief of those around them and by the degree that grief disrupts the security of their family life. Children bereaved of one parent often suffer the “loss” of the other parent as well. The remaining parent, affected by their own grief, may be unable to respond to the child in their usual way.

Timescales

There are no set timescales to grieving. It is important to consider the individual variations in how a child or young person may grieve. These will be determined by the context of the loss, the degree of attachment to the deceased person, the young person’s previous experiences of loss death and the support mechanisms around them. In general, the initial stage of disbelief and shock passes quite quickly. However, the more complex stage of adjustment and readiness to move on can take a long time – perhaps many years. The second year following the death of a loved one has been identified by some children as more difficult to cope with than the first. Of course, feelings of loss and sadness may be present to some extent for a lifetime. Suggesting that most people will get over the loss and sadness within a certain time may result in the bereaved feeling they “are doing it wrong” (grieving) and should be “getting over it” from subtle messages they get from those around them, including from well-meaning professionals.

Behavioural responses to death in children and young people

Children, like adults, react to death in individual ways. Some children do not react immediately and it may be that a minor, unrelated loss some time later will trigger a grief reaction. Changes may be evidenced in a child

or young person's responses in school and other settings. Responses may be emotional, social, behavioural, physical or academic.

Common examples of behavioural changes may include:

- Reluctance to go to school/reluctance to attend lessons
- Unwillingness to go out and play/mix with peers
- Problems with focusing on or completing school and other work
- Difficulties making and maintaining relationships
- Fears of being alone
- Becoming upset by seemingly minor events
- Changing patterns of social relationships e.g. becoming withdrawn, nervous or starting to bully others
- Aggression, anger and non-compliance
- Lower self-esteem and self-confidence
- Sullenness/irritability/clinginess/dependency/separation anxiety
- Regression to younger patterns of behaviour
- Sleep disturbance/nightmares
- Eating problems/change in eating patterns
- Complaining of headaches/stomach aches/pains or be prone to illness or infection
- Feeling tired and listless or becoming surprisingly hyperactive

Emotional responses to death in children and young people

Like adults, children experience a range of emotion as a consequence of bereavement. The following are the most likely:

Fear

Children and young people can be fearful for a number of reasons. They may be fearful of:

- Their own morality
- Going to sleep – nightmares and bedwetting may result
- Separation from the remaining parent – “Will they still be there when I go home?”
- Being deserted and unprotected – “Who will look after me?”
- Sharing feelings with other – “They’ll think I’m silly”
- Upsetting other people by a display for their own grief – “Will I make them cry too?”
- Further loss - “Who will be next?”

Guilt

Guilt is often felt after the death of someone significant. A child may feel guilt because:

- They believe the death to be punishment for their misbehaviour
- They once wished the person dead
- The chance to make amends has been removed
- They did not love the person enough
- Others may be idealise the deceased person and this may further complicate matters

The feelings of guilt are not easily expressed or recognised and can be long lasting.

Anger

Anger is a very normal reaction to death. Children may feel angry:

- With the person for dying and abandoning them

- With themselves for not doing something to prevent the death
- For the injustice of life

The anger may manifest itself outwardly by verbal outbursts, temper tantrums, irrational behaviour, fights, aggressive and destructive behaviour. The anger may, however, also be turned inwards and present as depression, withdrawal, illness and accident-proneness. The death of a parent or close family member can result in children feeling worthless. For example, “if my parent could die and leave me, I cannot be very important”.

Confusion

Children often experience confusion with regards to death. They may be confused:

- About their perceptions and memories of the dead person (especially in the face of others’ idealisation)
- About God and religion
- About the explanations for death which are given to them
- By the moodiness and unpredictability of those closest to them who are suffering from their own grief
- By being torn between childhood and adulthood. For example, they may feel they have to look after the surviving parent at a time when they desperately need to be looked after themselves.

How school and setting staff can help

Staff in schools and other settings are in a good position to offer support and to consider the needs of children and their families. Across a setting or school community, it is likely that there will be many pupils experiencing some form of loss which may have an impact on their family and school life. Settings and schools can provide children and young people with a safe and secure environment in which to grieve. When supporting children in school or in a setting, it is important not to make assumptions about family beliefs and cultural values. Careful consideration is needed to develop sensitive and empathic communication with the family to ascertain factual information, their rituals, customs and wishes. More information about different cultural belief about death can be found in the Schools Information Pack (Fact Sheet 11), the Child Bereavement Trust (www.childbereavementtrust.org.uk; see also reference list).

Helpful approaches when talking with children and young people

- Listening is important – listen carefully. Set time aside – be available. Prepare for a session – when and where will you meet?
- Show warmth and empathy and be respectful.
- Try not to interrupt – allow silences if need be, a pause may mean that the child may want to re-order their thoughts before continuing.
- Take time to clarify if you think you do not understand a point being made.
- If you need to ask a question try to use open questions. What/Where/Who/When/How? Are good words to start with e.g. How are feeling about this? How did this make you feel? Who would you like to know/tell about this? When would be a good time to share this?
- Paraphrasing helps to establish an understanding of an important point. The provision of a brief summary or paraphrase at a convenient point can help feel they are being listened to and can also help clarify that you have understood correctly. For example:
Child: “I was stunned when I was told and could not believe it”
Teacher: “So it shocked you and it was hard to believe” (summarising)
- Acknowledge what has been said – respond appropriately to non-verbal cues – the child may not wish to give you eye contact, but may nod or shake their head in response to a question.
- Encourage the learning of coping strategies so that a young person does not become over department.
- Allow the child to cry – reassure them that it is safe to express their emotion.
- Be honest; it is fine to say, “I don’t know” if you cannot answer the question.

Things to avoid

- **Platitudes:** “Don’t get upset, it’ll be alright”
- **Relating your own losses:** “yes I remember when my own mother died, I felt...”
- **Overcompensating:** “no, don’t ask her to do that, she’s been through such a lot, the poor child”
- **Changing the subject:** “Try not to think about it, now how about if you got on with...”
- **Minimising the loss:** “Yes, I know your hamster died but it is not the end of the world”
- **Telling the child what they should feel:** “I know your upset now but you’ll soon feel better”
- **Euphemisms** are generally used when people find it difficult to talk about something. Euphemisms about death and dying should be avoided when talking with bereaved children and young people. Sometimes adults, feel it is kinder to use a euphemism, especially when talking with very young children. Examples of euphemisms about death might include “gone to sleep”, “gone away”, “been taken”, “passed away”, “gone to the angels”. Euphemisms can lead to mis-understandings and confusion as children do not appreciate the meaning implied in the euphemisms. This is especially the case for children and young people who are literal thinkers (e.g. those on the Autism Spectrum) or at a concrete stage in the cognitive development. The use of euphemisms can lead to anxiety which can complicate the grieving process and may encourage young people to build up fantasies and myths around death (Lost for Words, 2005).

Other areas that you may need to consider are:

- Keeping the School Governing Body or Management Committee informed and the role of the Chair or other nominated Governor in supporting the Head Teacher/Manager and other staff;
- If you become increasingly concerned about the child over time you may wish to consider specialist counselling services, following discussion with the child, family member and support agencies;
- The language and manner that staff might use with a young person with special educational needs or disabilities, who has been affected by bereavement.
- How a death might be marked, both for an individual or for the wider community (e.g. memorial service, special assembly).
- Providing support for the member of staff who is predominantly helping the bereaved child, ensuring they are the right person to support in this demanding role and not too upset themselves.
- Adult reactions as people’s personal grief responses are triggered. Experience of working with Early Years’ settings suggests that this is often the first time that some young members of staff have experienced any death of someone they know well or are close to and they may need support to come to terms with their own unfamiliar reactions.
- Staff welfare and support systems outside the school or setting.

Who else can help a bereaved young person?

- Immediate family members
- Extended family members
- The child's friends
- School doctor and school nurse
- Community and/or religious leaders
- Specialist voluntary organisations for bereavement support
- Educational psychology and Education Social Work Services

Our Procedure

Whoever receives the information of the death will immediately inform the Head (or Heads of Department) – the purpose is to minimise distress, confusion, etc ...

The Headteacher will be responsible for putting up the notice on the entrance door(s) and the notice board in the corridor. The notice reads *"All staff please report to the office"*. These notices will be displayed for a period of seven days. In the event of multiple deaths the notice will have two or more stars.

The Headteacher and Heads of Department will personally inform all key staff and therapists.

The Heads of Department will be responsible for informing catering staff, transport, LEA and staff on long-term absence as appropriate.

A briefing for teachers and therapists will be held as soon as possible at which:

- A member of staff will be nominated for each class to inform the pupils in that class;
- A time will be agreed for the sharing of information with the pupils. This will usually be the day after the letter to families has gone out.
- A member of staff can elect to be accompanied or supported by another member of staff.
- In the event of the death happening during the school holidays, the guidelines will be followed on the first day of term.

At the briefing teachers will be given advice on appropriate words to use when telling pupils. Staff are requested not to use such terms as "passed away", "sleeping", "lost" or "gone away" as these can confuse and distress pupils.

No member of staff should feel that they are obliged to take responsibility for informing pupils or discussing a death. However, they are responsible for informing a senior member of staff so that the senior member of staff can take the required action to inform the pupils.

The school will use the services of the allocated Islington CAMHS therapist to offer support and guidance to groups or individual members of staff. The Deputy Head will make these arrangements.

The Headteacher will write to families of our pupils informing them of the bereavement. The letter will explain how and when we will be talking to the young people. Parents will have to opportunity to speak to their child beforehand. In the letter we will ask that parents contact us if they feel their child might need additional support.