

Honley CE (VC) Junior, Infant and Nursery School



Bereavement Policy

Reviewed and approved by Governors	December 2017
Next Review Date	December 2018

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-er wrought heart and bids it break.”

William Shakespeare, Macbeth

Rationale:

By creating a clear and robust policy the school can provide a framework for school staff members to address death and the consequences of death. A school policy will enable staff members to feel more confident when working with bereaved students and they will be able to support them more efficiently.

The role of the Headteacher/Deputy

In the event of the death of a pupil, a member of staff or a multiple loss within the school, the Head would take control of the situation, remembering every situation would be different and would be dealt with in accordance with the family's wishes. The head teacher will ensure that the following points are remembered:

- Inform **all** members of staff, including teaching, non-teaching, dinner ladies, kitchen staff, and site managers. If it is felt necessary (possibly because it is the weekend or holiday time) this should be by telephone. Otherwise an immediate staff meeting at the earliest possible time.
- Arrange a set time, agreed by all staff, for teachers to inform their class what has happened. It is very important to agree on exactly what is to be said. As much TA support as possible to be distributed throughout the school. Time must be allowed for different reactions to be accommodated.
- Absent pupils must be informed by a telephone call, on that day.
- Inform governors.
- Organise supply cover
- Write a newsletter to parents – must be on the first day. Give the basic facts, as would have been given to the children and alert parents to the possible distress their children will be feeling.
- Deal with the media, if necessary. It is imperative that only the Headteacher/Deputy performs this role.
- Remain in discreet contact with the family, to ensure their wishes are respected.
- Keep all staff, ex-members of staff and anyone else closely involved with the school fully informed of any funeral arrangements / memorial service.
- In the immediate future – remember to fully inform any supply staff, students on teaching practice and any parent helpers, of the situation.
- Keep all staff up to date with any further information – regular, or if necessary even daily staff meetings must be held.
- Be responsible for arranging a memorial service or setting up of a permanent memorial – planting a tree, special award, seat/bench. This will encourage forward thinking.
- Lead a specially prepared assembly, after the children and staff have all been told.
- Arrange for extra pastoral care / counselling, if it is felt necessary.

Procedure to be followed in the event of the death of a current pupil and/or the death of a pupil's immediate family member.

- Headteacher to inform class teacher and support staff at the soonest appropriate time.
- Headteacher to arrange an immediate staff meeting for all teaching and non-teaching staff – everyone must be included. Facts must be made as clear as possible and it should be decided at this meeting, exactly what all the children will be told.
- Class to be told as soon as possible, by own class teacher. Teacher to be responsible for telling any children who are absent – this must be done on that day.
- If family is on holiday, a letter must be written to be delivered before the family arrives home.
- Rest of school to be told by their own class teacher at an agreed time. This should be before any breaks or play times, which can be re-arranged if necessary.

Additional procedure to be followed in the event of the death of a member of staff

Headteacher to arrange an immediate staff meeting for all members of staff. It is vital that everyone is present at this meeting. An early morning assembly is a good time for this, enlisting the help of Deputy. As above, the facts must be made clear and it should be decided at this meeting exactly what the children are to be told, and when.

Obviously some members of staff will be more distressed than others and some will not be able to return to class immediately. It will be the responsibility of the Headteacher to make any arrangements to allow the staff some time to themselves should they need it.

IN ADDITION

Guidelines are available, with advice on how to help a bereaved child return to school and how we can help them come to terms with their bereavement. These guidelines will be kept in a bereavement file in the welfare office.

Appendix 1

Guidelines

General aims of these guidelines:

- For everyone to have a clear understanding of what bereavement means and to be aware of the different stages of bereavement.
- To help children and adults cope with bereavement as well as possible.
- To appreciate that everyone will react differently to bereavement.
- To understand that the breakup of a family through separation or divorce is a traumatic bereavement for a child.
- To have in place a course of action agreed upon by staff and the governing body, which is understood by everyone who comes into contact with the children.

Reactions to grief:

- Open distress
- Tears
- Panic
- Withdrawal
- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Refusal to co-operate
- Any other signs of stress / change of mood, which may be expressed in unexpected ways e.g. nervous giggling, stoical bravery, untypical aggression, becoming the class clown, or even total denial.

THESE ARE ALL NORMAL GRIEF REACTIONS

Use of words:

- When talking to a bereaved child about death, the words we use are very important. If death has been referred to as “falling asleep” it is logical for children to become fearful of sleeping or of going to bed. “Loss” implies that something is lost and could be found again.

Please note, research has found that children as young as seven can grasp the concept of never returning.

Do not say to a bereaved child:

- “I know how you feel” – you don’t.
- “You’ll get over it” – they won’t, they will learn that life goes on but that it will be different.

Do say

- I care. I’m here, anytime, anywhere. I will cry with you if need be – I will talk about your mum, dad, Nan etc, and we will laugh about your happy memories.
- I won’t mind how long you grieve for – grieving is so natural and acceptable.
- I don’t know how you feel but with sharing perhaps I will learn a little of what you are going through. Perhaps you will feel comfortable talking to me – do you want to give it a try?

Definition of Death:

This may be of use with some children.

Death is a natural part of life. All living things – plants, animals and people, are special parts of the natural world. Usually we have long, healthy lives, but not always. Like all other living things though, people grow old and reach the end of their life. This is called death or dying.

How we can help the child/children with death and grief

Death of an immediate family member:

- Being realistic and honest is the best any teacher or adult can do for a child. No child is taken in by pretend cheerfulness.
- Be aware of and respect the wishes and beliefs of the family.
- Encourage children to express their feelings. Do not tell a child how to feel.
- Help children use up their feelings in a positive way.
- Children learn to mourn by observing others. They need to be warned about different adult reactions and receiving mixed messages.
- Emotional pain is catching – be prepared.
- Try not to single out a grieving child for special attention. They need to feel part of the class and it helps if you expect them to continue to perform, though obviously at a different level.

Death of a pupil:

Whilst the issues raised will all apply, the following points should also be noted:

- Where a pupil has died, the affected class will grieve far longer than the rest of the school. Those who had a close relationship with the deceased will need extra care.
- The child's workspace should be left as it is for a while, and should be referred to. This allows grief to continue in the hearts and minds of the children. The deceased made a contribution to the class and continues to be part of it because of his/her death.

Death of a member of staff:

Children generally believe that teachers / support staff leave the school for other posts or to retire. For most, it is quite inconceivable that they might die whilst still being employed by the school. We as adults have an inbuilt resistance to accepting death, especially if it is someone of our own age or younger. When such an event occurs it is usually extremely traumatic, especially for members of staff forced to deal with their own grief as well as comforting the children. Planning how we as a school would manage such an event is very important.

Multiple loss in the school:

Where several children and/or staff die in one accident, staff, pupils, parents, governors, outside agencies and the press, all become entwined. Areas of responsibility need to be very clear. It is essential to gather together all of the facts and details of the accident, and then determine the likely impact on the whole school.

This then has to be dealt with appropriately. In the case of multiple deaths, additional support and resources may well be required. Additional staff may also be needed. In such instances, effective communication channels are essential.

Preparing for a pupil to return to school:

For the bereaved child or member of staff, returning to school will be traumatic. It is essential to pave the way for their return. It is important that everyone in school is aware of what has happened. If everybody knows, and the bereaved person is aware of this, then it should make the situation more bearable. It is also important for everyone to be aware so they can appreciate and make allowances for uncharacteristic behaviour. If staff find a pupil in a distressed state, they will at least be prepared in their own minds as how best to deal with it.

School as a safe haven:

Whilst it is only natural to show compassion and allow expression to those suffering grief, it is important not to forget that for the bereaved, school, with its routines and rituals, can provide a respite. Death brings unpredictability, fear and uncertainty. For the bereaved, family life at this traumatic time, can be particularly distressing, routines upset, relationships strained, and the future uncertain.

Ongoing Remembrance:

It is important to remember that anniversaries often spark a revival of feelings associated with the initial bereavement. The family and close friends will remember the deceased person's birthday, as they will the anniversary of the death. Siblings in school will be particularly vulnerable at these difficult times. Staff should be made aware of such dates in order that they may react with the necessary sensitivity and respect.

Children's Understanding and Reactions to Bereavement:

One of the most painful stresses with which a child has to cope is the loss of a parent, a close family member or a friend. Children grieve, they experience pain and sadness but they eventually need to detach their feelings from the deceased just as adults do.

Research shows that children do understand death from an early age. This develops from a belief in the reversibility of death in the pre-school years, to a gradual understanding of death's finality and irreversibility. Children's understanding of death develops alongside their cognitive development; it may occur at different speeds, but the sequence appears to be the same in the majority of children.

Children aged 2-5 years

Children aged between 2 to 5 years think that death is reversible and that people who have died can come back. Their thoughts are characterised by what we call "magical thinking". Children can be convinced that it was something they said or did or thought that caused the person to die. The flip side of this thinking is that they can believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the dead person back. They need to be reassured repeatedly that the death was not their fault. Children's thinking in this age range is also concrete – they cannot grasp abstract concepts or roundabout ways of saying things. Instead use specific concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and give specific explanations about why the person died. Don't be afraid to be honest and tell your child if you don't have an answer. It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to behaviour patterns they had when they were younger such as bed-wetting, use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Try to be tolerant. In time, these earlier behaviour patterns will probably disappear again, once family life resumes. One of the most difficult aspects of a child's grief at these ages is how they ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to begin making sense of their loss. Children are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that your explanations aren't good enough - it is just the way they do things at this age. Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss. When they experience a death in this age range they are at their most helpless and are most dependent on adults to regain their balance.

Children aged 6 to 9

In this age range the child begins to develop an understanding of death as irreversible and something that will happen to all living things but they may be confused about it. It is not uncommon for children to think of death as something spooky, like a zombie or a spirit that comes to get you. It is important that their specific worries are spoken about, that they share bad dreams and are told that what they're feeling is normal. Children are reassured by having their worrying and negative thoughts talked through, giving them skills and confidence to be in charge of them. Children may display what you feel is an unhealthy curiosity with issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear explanations. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat, breath and keep warm. It is important to give them information and tell them that once someone has died, the body doesn't feel any more and they don't get hungry. Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal but it is important that routines are maintained while gently acknowledging when

someone important dies. Children this age may have difficulty expressing feelings verbally and may retreat into themselves. In dealing with their feelings of helplessness, you may notice increased aggression. It is important to avoid clichés such as “You’re such a brave boy/girl”. Children will interpret this that you want or need them not to share their feelings. They need you and other important people in their lives to show them that it’s OK to express their feelings.

Children aged 9 to 13

In this age range children are much more aware of the finality of death and the impact the death has on them. They are able to understand death as both concrete and abstract. Children may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers. The death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else. It is important to find ways to build their self-esteem. Children at this age are beginning to think of the longer term consequences of the loss of the relationship. They are aware of the loss they feel in the present but also of the losses they will experience in the coming months and years when they encounter certain important milestones or occasions and realise that they won’t be able to share these with the person who has died.

At this age children are beginning to move away from dependence on the family and they start to form important relationships with other children. The death of someone important can easily destabilise them, leaving them feeling unsafe and more dependent on the family. Their ability to manage their feelings may be disrupted and lead to mood swings or more definite up’s and down’s in their feelings. Big emotional releases (such as anger or distress) are not uncommon but can be scary for children at this stage. They will benefit from your willingness to listen and your assurances that the feelings are normal.

Grief Reactions:

Older school age children may show some of the grief reactions of much younger children, such as bed-wetting. They may also suffer with eating or sleeping problems. They can become irritable and show aggression towards other children and adults, or may simply become clingy and show separation anxiety. Some of these behaviours can be aggravated by their fear for the physical safety of the remaining family members. This may result in the child not wanting to leave the family home. It is also common for these children to develop psychosomatic illnesses, headaches, sickness and diarrhoea. These problems can disrupt their school attendance, resulting in a fall in academic learning. Due to peer pressure, children may be less able to express their feelings. It is very important for them to appear the same as the others, signalling the message that they are not grieving and therefore do not require support. Unless the process of grieving is completed however, they may have difficulties in developing future relationships, leading to potential emotional and social problems in later life. Children need both the opportunities to be able to express their grief without fear of being ridiculed by their peers, and the chance to forget at times and get on with their normal daily activities.

A teacher dealing with children of any age should remember that many children might have difficulty in being able to verbally express their feelings adequately. It is therefore not uncommon to observe behavioural outbursts, fighting with other children, tantrums or hysterical crying. This tends to happen more at playtime and in situations that are less structured and controlled. This needs to be dealt with in a sensitive but firm way, thus providing both the bereaved and the other pupils with a sense of security in the fairness, consistency and stability of school discipline. Teachers should also be aware that although instinctively they may wish to give special attention to a bereaved child, this can cause resentment among their peers, potentially leaving them more vulnerable.

Self care for those working with the bereaved:

It’s easy to overlook the stresses and anxieties placed on those dealing with the bereaved. In many instances these can be quite exacting and yet because our sympathy and attention naturally rests with those grieving we can easily forget the emotional weight resting on the shoulders of those offering support. The following points are worth bearing in mind:

- Anticipate possible reactions you may experience with grief and loss. Each one of us is likely to react differently depending on our age, personality, cultural and religious backgrounds. If you are ever unsure about how you should react to others' grief, honesty is always the best line of approach.
- Try to accept that you may experience emotional reactions yourself. Such an event might trigger thoughts of your own past grief experiences. You may find yourself doubting your own abilities. It is not unusual to experience existential thoughts and find yourself querying life's injustices, questioning perhaps your own beliefs.
- Panic attacks and worries about death – your own, or perhaps that of your family – may also become a preoccupation.
- Try to accept that giving such support can affect you in ways perhaps you had not considered. Normally these reactions will subside after a few days or weeks but if they persist do not be afraid to ask for professional support.
- Never take on too much. If you find that you are having difficulty in managing to cope, look to other support – a partner, friend or colleague.

It is important to remember that you alone cannot carry other people's grief.

Appendix 2

KEY POINTS FOR COUNSELLING THE BEREAVED

- Offer support, but don't be obtrusive.
- Share grief.
- Allow discussion.
- Allow expression.
- Talk openly but honestly about the person who has died.
- Be aware of other people's beliefs and values.
- Reassure those who feel that they are in some way to blame.
- Be honest with explanations.
- Be compassionate but firm.
- Be prepared to ask for extra help if needed.
- Expect regression.
- Never avoid the bereaved.
- Never pretend life will be the same.
- Never put a time limit on how long you expect the grieving period to last.
- Be honest at all times.

The charter for bereaved children

Winston's Wish is the leading childhood bereavement charity and the largest provider of services to bereaved families. This 'charter' is based on our conversations with thousands of children and their families. They have told us what helps them to rebuild their lives and face the future with hope.

B Bereavement support
Bereaved children need to receive support from their family, from their school and from important people around them.

"It helped to know that other people understood what I was going through."
Rachel (9)

"It's OK to cry and it's OK to be happy as well."
James (12)

E Express feelings and thoughts
Bereaved children should be helped to find appropriate ways to express all their feelings and thoughts associated with grief, such as sadness, anxiety, confusion, anger and guilt.

R Remember the person who has died
Bereaved children have the right to remember the person who has died for the rest of their lives; sharing special as well as difficult memories.

"I like to show my memory box to people who didn't know my dad."
Paul (15)

"Mum died of a heart attack but I don't understand why it attacked her."
Bethany (4)

E Education and information
Bereaved children need and are entitled to receive answers to their questions and information that clearly explains what has happened, why it has happened and what will be happening.

A Appropriate response from schools and colleges
Bereaved children need understanding and support from their teachers and fellow students without having to ask for it.

"My teacher remembers the days that are difficult like Father's Day and his birthday."
Alex (10)

"I helped dad choose the flowers for mum's funeral. I felt proud of that."
Tom (7)

V Voice in important decisions
Bereaved children should be given the choice about their involvement in important decisions that have an impact on their lives such as planning the funeral and remembering anniversaries.

E Enjoyment
Bereaved children have the right to enjoy their lives even though someone important has died.

"Seeing my son meeting other children in the same situation as him was so helpful."
John (parent)

"It was good to be with other people who had an idea of what I was going through."
Chris (11)

M Meet others
Bereaved children benefit from the opportunity to meet other children who have had similar experiences.

E Established routines
Bereaved children should, whenever possible, be able to continue activities and interests so that parts of their lives can still feel 'normal'.

"I kept going to swimming club. I thought about my brother while I swam."
Amy (14)

"I now understand that it wasn't something I did or didn't do that made her die."
Neda (16)

N Not to blame
Bereaved children should be helped to understand that they are not responsible, and not to blame, for the death.

T Tell the story
Bereaved children are helped by being encouraged to tell an accurate and coherent story of what has happened. These stories need to be heard by those important people in their lives.

"My picture shows how the car missed me but knocked dad off his bike."
Sophie (9)

Winston's Wish
the charity for bereaved children

Helpline 0800 8 020 021 • E-mail info@winstonswish.org.uk
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