

Loss and bereavement

The following guidance notes have been reproduced in a modified form from Ealing's Guidelines and Policy for Schools on Personal and Social Education.

"A child can live through anything so long as he or she is told the truth and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering." (Eda Les Shan)

The 'Good Grief' pack has been used as the main reference for these notes (see section 16). Familiarity with understanding loss is an excellent life skill. When a bereavement does occur it then becomes more manageable because it is better understood.

Stage of grief, shock and disbelief

When someone dies, whether it is sudden or expected, the initial reaction is one of shock and disbelief. Shock may be immediate but it can also be delayed and its effects need to be acknowledged and recognised.

Denial

The period of shock is often followed by a period of denial. During this time there is difficulty in accepting that the dead person will not return.

Growing awareness

This gives way to a growing awareness of the loss. It may be experienced as yearning and pining, anger, depression, guilt and anxiety.

Acceptance

Often it is only after the first round of anniversaries – major holidays, birthdays etc – that acceptance of the death really begins. This process of 'letting go' may take much longer. The shock of sudden death e.g. a road accident or heart attack, brings a sense of unreality. There can be a whole range of reactions to shock: shaking, crying, headaches to name a few. These may occur immediately, but they can also be delayed and appear months later. Some families have to cope with the experience of terminal illness with its emotional seesaws of hope and despair. Even when someone has been ill for a long time there is still a sense of shock when death occurs. Suicide can leave people with a sense of guilt and failure and needs very sensitive handling.

Grief and children

Children, like adults are individuals. They go through the stages of physical, mental, emotional and social development at different rates. Grief and the variety of ways in which it can be expressed needs to be acknowledged. It helps if we are aware of the closeness of the relationship, previous experience of loss, type of death, and the level of understanding before the death takes place.

There are particular aspects about children's perceptions of death that need special consideration:

Fear

Young children's lives revolve completely around the immediate family. If one of these family members dies, fear for the rest can become of paramount importance. Lack of experience of death In our society children, and sometimes adults, may well have had no first hand experience of death. The media, especially TV, can give an unreal picture. The age of the bereaved child should be taken into account:

1 to 3 years

Very young children do not understand that death is permanent. They may constantly ask when the dead person is coming back. They may become insecure and become frightened when separated from a parent. They may regress and behave like a baby.

3 to 7 years

Children of this age are very egocentric. They believe that they are responsible for what ever happens. Those who are bereaved may therefore believe that they are to blame for the death. If this feeling is not explained, they may carry the guilt for the rest of their lives. Children of this age can react casually to the news of the death but may ask about it at a later stage. Some children may believe that the dead person will return. Some will believe that they might die as well.

8 to 12 years

At this age, children begin to realise that death is permanent. They also recognise that they will die one day. They can ask questions that adults may be surprised at, such as "where did the body go?" or "what does the body look like – is it like he's sleeping?" They simply express their curiosity as it may be their first experience of death and they are trying to gain an understanding of the process.

12 years to adult

Teenagers understand the impact of loss and death but may not be emotionally prepared for it. Young people of this age are already experiencing a mixture of emotions and their response to death may be more extreme and variable than an adults would be. Children who have experienced a death may show changes in behaviour. They may become clingy.

They may be afraid to go to sleep at night for fear that they will not wake up again. Bed-wetting may be a sign of grief. They may show aggressive or withdrawn behaviour. Any change in behaviour needs to be noted and the child given extra care and support. This can happen weeks and months after the actual death.

Some suggestions for coping with situation

The death of a staff member

The immediate issue is to break the news to the other staff (some of whom may have worked with the person for many years), to the parents and to the children. When the news is announced the language used is very important. It is not enough to say that someone has passed away or passed over. It needs to be stated that they have died. Further explanation may be required for younger children who will want to know when the person is coming back even though they have been told quite clearly that they have died.

A primary school in this situation recently sent a letter home in a sealed envelope asking the parents to explain again to their child what had happened and asking them to observe their child's reactions and to let the school know of any unusual behaviour. It may be necessary to translate the letter into different languages so that all parents have access to it. Attending a funeral can be a helpful part of the grieving process. If some of the pupils are to attend the funeral then it is a good idea to explain what happens at a funeral service and/or cremation and some of the beliefs expressed.

Circumstances vary enormously but one secondary school closed early so that staff could attend the funeral of a colleague. Each year group in the school was invited to send two pupil representatives. Attendance at a funeral service should be encouraged, not forced. Time for discussion of this choice needs to be given. A special assembly is a way of celebrating the life and achievements of the dead person and gives the school a corporate means of thanksgiving and farewell. Letters of sympathy and support, however inadequate we may feel they sound, are usually of enormous comfort to the relatives.

Schools might wish to consider having a small resource of books and addresses, which could be used and loaned to staff and parents (see book list)

The death of a child

When a child dies we feel the sadness of a young life cut short. For the relatives there is always the sense of what might have been. The quality of support offered by a school in these circumstances can be of tremendous help to all. Again the immediate issue is to tell the staff and decide how to tell the pupils. Where possible, it is best to do this in the familiar surrounding of the class group.

The teacher, any assistants and the children in the class(es) concerned will need support from the rest of the school. The adults in this situation will inevitably be modelling ways of coping with grief whether they wish it or not. Remember that the pupils need to see that the adults too are sad and upset. Staff need to have some understanding of coming to terms with losses in their own lives and not to be in the process of grieving themselves because of a recent major loss. They need a good support network and be used to teaching sensitive issues.

They will know not to assume that children are all right because they show no visible signs of distress. They will make positive approaches to offer help and support, not waiting for the children to make the first move. Some schools have found it helpful to display pictures of the dead child in a prominent place. The photos can come from other children, school outing albums or the bereaved family. Bereaved siblings will need special care and their classes need help to know what to do and say to help them.

Close friends will also suffer an enormous loss and it is all too easy to overlook the effects that this traumatic event may have on them. Visiting the family is important immediately but so is keeping in touch if this is welcomed. Extra care needs to be taken of any siblings, decisions will need to be made about the dead child's personal things. Holding a special assembly at which the life of the pupil is celebrated can be of considerable benefit. It requires careful planning and consultation with the family concerned. It can be an occasion to invite all parents and people of the community. Very often a whole community will be affected by the death of a child and parents will be coping with the shock and the fear that this could happen to their child too.

The family might wish to make a gift to the school – such as a tree, rosebush, table and seat for the play area, etc. The children in the class may find comfort for themselves and give comfort to the family by making a scrapbook of the class activities, topics, etc in which the dead child was involved. In one school, where a pupil was killed in a road accident whilst on holiday, her class were asked what she enjoyed doing most. They decided that the answer was 'play' so they were given an extra period of play in her memory.

Coping with death is not easy. It is a whole school issue, which can do much to bring a school, and the community it serves closer together. Some children, particularly the special friend(s) of the dead child, can be particularly distressed. Schools could perhaps provide one particular person (maybe the child could say whom they would like) to be close to that child and help them through the coming days and weeks. Are there any other children or adults in the school, who have faced similar circumstances, who would be willing to form a support group? Part of the help schools can give is to put people in touch with the relevant agencies – CRUSE, The Samaritans, Child Death Helpline etc. (see section on Useful Organisations)

The death of a parent

In all circumstances children need:

- Information and honesty about what has happened and what is likely to happen. This may need to be given more than once.
- The recognition that their concept of time is often very different from that of an adult. 'Today' is now, 'soon' is hours away and 'tomorrow' may not mean anything at all.
- Help to find the right words to talk about death.
 - The surviving grieving parent often looks to the school for help and support too.
 - Partnership with the parent is vital at this time.
 - Encourage the parent to ring CRUSE Bereavement Care Helpline (see Section on list of Useful Organisation)
- Reassurance. The child needs to know what will change and what won't. A world which seemed safe, secure and reliable suddenly appears just the opposite. School may provide the only seemingly secure environment.
- Understanding that they often have a sense of guilt. They feel that they have somehow caused the death.
- Safe ways of expressing their grief other than in words, e.g. drawing, music.
- To accept that life goes on and that it is all right to relax and have fun.
- The understanding that 'treasures' which may seem unimportant to adults are an important way for a child to cope with bereavement. Remember to amend the school's parent address list. If the death occurs at a time of school transfer please inform the new school.

Supporting colleagues who have been bereaved

We can support them by:

- Offering the opportunity to talk about their feelings and the person who has died even though it is upsetting for them and for us.
- Offering support in the classroom if it is needed.
- Being aware of signs of stress, a change in behaviour for example.
- Sending cards, letters, flowers. But choose the time carefully, not when a major professional task is imminent and tears might overwhelm them.

Religious beliefs

We need to be aware of and sensitive to the religious beliefs of the people concerned and what the symbols and rituals mean for them. We live in a society in which all the major faiths are represented as well as humanist viewpoints. Incorporating work about the ways in which the important stages of life are marked by the different religions in the school's Religious Education programme can be a non-threatening way of preparing all pupils for some of the experiences they are going to meet (see Section on Funeral Rites Across Different Cultures).

Things to consider in the event of a death of a pupil

We thought it might be helpful to list some of things that have to be considered if this happens. These suggestions are based on the experiences of Ealing schools:

- Contacting the LA designated officer, which will set the LA's response in motion.
- Telling the staff and making sure that all staff are told and supported before they enter the classroom.
- Telling SMSAs before they go on duty and any other staff expected on site at different times during the day.
- Discussing how the children are to be told, as individuals, small groups or whole classes.
- Special care for any siblings and special friends – liaise with other schools if necessary.
- Special care for any staff or children recently bereaved.
- If a whole school assembly is scheduled for that day consider postponing it until the children have had a chance to receive the news in smaller groups from a known and trusted adult.
 - If the death occurred in the local community some children and parents may already know about it and rumours about the circumstances will abound.
 - It is best to be as truthful as possible as children will make up stories to compensate for lack of information.
 - It is important to make a public announcement so that the school becomes established as a grieving school and everyone becomes freer to explore their loss and concerns.
- Informing the bereaved pupil's parents that the school will be sending out a letter notifying other parents and the reason why.
- Letter to all parents in the dead child's class telling them what has happened and asking them to talk to their children and to be ready for signs of anxiety. A handout of ideas for parents (from the Good Grief pack) on how to help children with their grief has been appreciated by parents in the past. This handout has been translated into Urdu, Somali and Gujarati.
- Visiting the family. Consider who has links and is sensitive to religious and cultural traditions.
- Writing letters to the family.
- Deciding who is to go to the funeral and preparing children for it. Will it be an open coffin? What cultural and religious customs do you need to be prepared for? Please ask beforehand. It is best if younger children are accompanied by their parents and that they go home for a drink and have some space before returning to school. If this is not possible, it is helpful to arrange for the children who attend the funeral to have a drink and a biscuit separately with someone who feels able to answer any questions before they return to their classes.
- What to do with the child's personal belongings. Involve close friends or the class in the discussion.
- Planning a special assembly.
- Making a book for the child's family if appropriate.
- Contacting the Council's Communications Unit for advice if there is likely to be high media profile.
- Making sure that the class the child was in and any special friends are supported.
- Putting people in touch with the relevant organisations if they wish.
- Remember the strain you are all under and give yourselves "treats".

PLEASE SEE THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS:

Section nine - Funeral Rite across Different Cultures

Appendix two - Resource List

Appendix three - List of Useful Organisations

Was this page useful?

- [Yes](#)
- [Neutral](#)
- [No](#)

Last updated: 01 Aug 2023
