



Guide to supporting bereavement in schools

(Including response to a Child's Death)

The Victory Academy

Due for review: September 2019

AIMS:

At The Victory Academy our aims are:

- to support all those affected by loss and death in a supportive and caring environment in which everyone can respond appropriately to individual circumstances;
- to offer understanding of the impact of loss and grief on children and young people's physical and emotional health;
- to gain insight into children and adult reactions to loss and grief and how we should respond in order to meet the needs of grieving pupils, parents and staff;
- to give pastoral support for pupils, parents and staff;
- to provide effective support for all members of the school community and access to relevant support materials.

This policy outlines practical measures to be taken when people are in shock, or upset, especially with sudden or multiple deaths or traumatic circumstances.

Rationale:

Every 22 minutes in the UK a parent of dependent children dies, leaving about 41,000 bereaved children each year. Many more are bereaved of a grandparent, sibling, friend or other significant person, and, sadly, around 12,000 children die in the UK each year.

Within our school community there will almost always be some children who are struggling with bereavement – or sometimes the entire school community is impacted by the death of a member of staff or a pupil. We would hope not to encounter such circumstances, but the statistical inevitability of such an occurrence implies the necessity of having a guide to supporting bereavement in place in order that we might be *proactive*, rather than *reactive*, when responding to these challenging situations. Empathic understanding in the familiar and secure surroundings of school may be all the bereavement support some children – or staff – require, though referral to more specialist

support should be a consideration where the impact of grief is more complex. Additional information and resources can be accessed at www.childbereavement.org.uk

The Children Act 1989 aims to ensure that the welfare of the child is paramount, working in partnership with parents to protect the child from harm (http://www.careandthelaw.org.uk/eng/b_section2). All intentions of this guidance endorse that aim as we endeavour to counter any adverse effects of bereavement and maintain pupils' emotional well-being.

How children understand death at different ages:

Children at different stages of development have different understandings of death. Development influences the way children react to a loss and the type of support they need. Children's reactions are also influenced by other factors, including personality, previous experiences with death, and support available from family members. Note that children do not move abruptly from one stage of development to the next and that characteristics from each stage may overlap.

Preschool-age children (2-5 years old)

At this stage of development children believe that death is reversible. They may also be convinced that it was something that they said or did which caused the person to die. Abstract concepts are not easily grasped, and so it is important that the child is spoken to in very concrete terms. In order to make sense of what has happened children at this age may often ask the same questions over and over again.

Key points at this age:

- Children are curious about death and believe death is temporary or reversible.
- Children may see death as something like sleeping—the person is dead but only in a limited way and may continue to breathe or eat after death.
- They are characterised by 'magical thinking' and understand the world as a mix of reality and fantasy.
- They are naturally egocentric and see themselves as the cause of events around them.

- They often feel guilty and believe that they are responsible for the death of a loved one, perhaps because they were 'bad' or wished the person would 'go away'.
- They may think that they can make the deceased come back if they are good enough.
- They will worry about who will take care of them and about being abandoned.
- Children are greatly affected by the sadness of surviving family members.
- They cannot put their feelings into words and instead react to loss through behaviours such as irritability, aggression, physical symptoms, difficulty sleeping, or regression (such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking).

Primary school-age children (six to 12 years)

Children begin to develop the understanding that death is irreversible and something that happens eventually to all living things. Death may be regarded as something that is a bit 'spooky', and they may display what seems to be an unhealthy curiosity in the more morbid aspects of the death. Children at this age may complain of headaches, a sore tummy or other ailments. These are referred to as 'somatic' complaints and are generally physical manifestations of emotional pain. Behaviour may change, but it is important to encourage children at this age to express their feelings and understand that what they are feeling is perfectly natural.

Key points at this age:

- Children understand that death is final, but see it as something that happens only to other people.
- They may think of death as a person or a spirit, like a ghost, angel, or a skeleton.
- By the age of 10 they understand that death is universal, unavoidable, and will happen to them.
- Children are often interested in the specific details of death and what happens to the body after death.
- They may experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness, and worry about their own death.
- They may continue to have difficulty expressing their feelings and may react through behaviours such as school phobia, poor performance in school, aggression, physical symptoms, withdrawal from friends, and regression.

- Children still worry about who will take care of them and will likely experience insecurity, clinginess, and fear of abandonment.
- They may still worry that they are to blame for the death.

Adolescents and teenagers

At this stage of development, young people are developing their own ideas about who they are and what is important to them in their lives. They are more aware of their future. Death may cause them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of life, or they may not want to reflect, and hide their feelings. As adults our job is to let them know that we are there if they need to talk, or that we can find someone else to help if necessary. Although the grieving process at this age is much like adults, teenagers are still developing emotionally, and need support. By now young people are much more aware of the finality of death, and the impact that the death has had on them. The death of someone important may make them feel different, at the very time that they want to be the same as everyone else. They are aware of the longer term impact of their loss, when future milestones will not be shared with the person who has died. Relationships with others are becoming increasingly important, and any loss can lead to feelings of anger or severe distress.

Key points at this age:

- They have an adult understanding of the concept of death, but do not have the experiences, coping skills, or behaviour of an adult.
- They may 'act out' in anger or show impulsive or reckless behaviours, such as substance misuse or fighting in school.
- They may experience a wide range of emotions, but not know how to handle them or feel comfortable expressing them.
- The reality of death contradicts a teenager's view of himself or herself as invincible, and teenagers may question their faith or their understanding of the world.
- Developmental issues of independence and separation from parents can interfere with the ability to receive support from adult family members.
- Coping strategies may create tension with family members, as adolescents may cope by spending more time with friends or by withdrawing from the family to be alone.

Things to consider:

- Do not be afraid to use the words dead or death *“I was very sorry to hear of the death of your...”*
- Children and young people need honesty. Although sometimes difficult, it is better to answer awkward questions truthfully.
- Recognise the full tragedy for the child. Do not try to comfort with comments such as *“at least it is not as bad as...”* You might think this is helpful, it is not.
- Reassure them that they are not responsible. If this is an issue (it may not be for all children and young people), reassure them that the death was not their fault.

Whether a pupil is returning to school quickly or after a period of absence, staff should ensure that there are systems in place to support them, for example:

- Time out cards – special cards giving the young person permission to leave the class when feeling overwhelmed or emotional. Young people often feel embarrassed about showing their emotions and do not want to cry in front of their peers. By offering time out the young person can express their grief away from the classroom.
- Support the young person to express their grief if appropriate.
- Access to a quiet space for time out and reflection if required.
- More intensive support from pastoral care staff.
- Access to a school counsellor, if there is one, and/or local services as appropriate.
- Grief is a very personal experience; every child and young person will experience it differently. Give them space to deal with their feelings in their own way.

As time passes...

- Be prepared to listen, again and again and again.
- Give bereaved pupils time. It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school work. Remember that they will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them.
- Offer tailor-made support if required, or by referring into a local service provider.
- Be aware of important dates such as the anniversary of the death, Mothers’ Day, Fathers’ Day, and so on.

Children and young people with Additional Support Needs are sometimes assumed to need protection from death and dying more than most or not have the capacity to understand. It can be easy to underestimate their ability to cope with difficult situations. The challenge is finding creative ways to communicate when words are sometimes not appropriate. If using words, use the real ones, for example dead and dying, not euphemisms.

Expressing their grief

Children do not need protection from the feelings and emotions associated with grief but support to express them and reassurance that these sometimes powerful and overwhelming emotions are normal and necessary. This is even more the case for children with additional support needs. For further information, refer to the Child Bereavement Charity website

www.childbereavement.org.uk/

PROCEDURES

When a bereavement or loss situation occurs the following steps will be taken:

- Contact will be made with the family to identify the facts and offer support. The family's wishes should be respected in communicating with others. Factual information is essential to avoid rumour and confusion, whilst being sensitive to cultural and religious considerations.

NB: We need to be mindful of the use of social media sites and their impact throughout this time as rumour and gossip spread quickly.

- Staff will be informed before pupils and decisions taken concerning the best way to inform pupils and for the internal mechanisms for support to be organised and employed.
- Pupils will be informed in the agreed manner.
- A letter to all school families affected should be composed at the earliest opportunity and a decision made as to whom, and how, it should be distributed.
- The Local Authority, parish clergy and other agencies will be informed and involved as appropriate.

- If appropriate, a press statement will be prepared and a strategy for dealing with the media agreed with the family. This should be discussed with PLMR and to use the communications@tsatrust.org.uk email address before any statement is made.
- Discussions will take place concerning attendance at the funeral and any memorial service (including school assembly) agreed with the family.
- A review process will be agreed with the appropriate staff.

TRAINING

Training and development is a fundamental aspect of our school community and appropriate staff will have the opportunity to undertake relevant training in the management of bereavement. This may include general awareness-raising for all staff and more specialised training for those with specific responsibility, such as senior staff members and pastoral staff, for example the home school support worker.