

Bereavement Guidance for Teachers and Teaching Assistants

Most children and young people affected by a death just need adults who care about them. You cannot take away their sadness, but you can acknowledge it and support them through the experience. Reactions will vary. If they were not close to the person who died, they may be unaffected. However, it is best not to make assumptions. Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them. Questions are healthy, as is curiosity.

Questions

A good approach with any age is to acknowledge what has happened and then answer questions as they arise. Having accurate information will enable you to answer questions with facts rather than rumour; try to obtain this from a reliable source so that information is both accurate and sensitive to the wishes of the bereaved family. Young children often do not have adult inhibitions surrounding death and you may be taken aback by some of their comments and reactions. It is not unusual for them to act out funerals or play at being dead. It is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Teenagers may become withdrawn and difficult to engage with. Respect their need for personal space whilst gently reminding them that you are there if they need you.

Be truthful

Children often have a surprising capacity to deal with the truth, if given information in simple, straightforward language, appropriate for their age and understanding. Young children tend to make up what they do not know and their imaginings are often worse than the reality. Adolescents and teenagers will resent a lack of honesty in the adults around them and the resultant loss of trust will be difficult to regain.

Stick to routines

Maintain routines, such as going to school. Familiar situations and contact with friends brings security and a sense of normality. Continue to expect the usual rules of behaviour. Normality with love and compassion is what to aim for. Do not think that you have to hide your own sadness. Seeing adults expressing emotion can give a child of any age 'permission' to do the same, if they feel they want to. Hearing how you are feeling may help them to consider their own feelings.

Listen

Be ready to listen but don't expect your child to always want to talk. They usually will when ready, and often to people who are not immediate family. One way to create opportunities for sharing thoughts and memories is with a joint activity. Young people especially, tend to talk when they do not feel under pressure to do this.

You may notice some of the following which are all normal as long as they do not continue for too long:

- Change in behaviour, perhaps becoming unnaturally quiet and withdrawn or unusually aggressive.
- Anger is a common response at all ages and may be directed at people or events which have no connection to the death.
- Disturbed sleep and bad dreams.
- Anxiety demonstrated by clingy behaviour and a reluctance to be separated from parents or carers. Older children may express this in more practical ways, for example by expressing concerns over issues that adults may perceive as insensitive or unimportant.
- Being easily upset by events that would normally be trivial to them.
- Difficulty concentrating, being forgetful and generally 'not with it.' This makes school work particularly difficult and academic performance may suffer. Older children may feel that there is no point in working hard at school and they might lose a general sense of purpose in their lives.
- Physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches and a general tendency to be run down and prone to minor illness. Grief is a natural and necessary response to a death. However, if concerned about your child, do not hesitate to seek advice.

Bereavement:

At 5-7 years old children are at their most vulnerable as they have some cognitive ability but no coping capabilities. Their behaviour may change- anger, attention demanding, socially inept, introvert or aggressive.

2-5 Years

Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality. Some may not appreciate the permanence of death: 'Shall we dig granny up now?' They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep'. Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened. As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death. They are prone to fantasise at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something scarier than reality.

5-8 Years

At about five years of age most children are beginning to realise that dead people are different from those who are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink. At around seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone. This can result in separation anxiety. They are better-able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected. They need to be given an opportunity to

ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust. They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.

8-12 Years

At this age children's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. An important factor is their deepening realisation of the inevitability of death and an increasing awareness of their own mortality. This can result in fear and insecurity. Their need to know details continues, and they will seek answers to very specific questions. Adolescence The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving. Death increases anxieties about the future, and they may question the meaning of life and experience depression.

Strategies in class

- Start by acknowledging you have some sad news to give.
- Be honest. Give the news stating simple facts, use the words dead/died.
- Listen
- Help them come to terms with the death
- Help them accept their dad's death
- Accept that they might not wish to talk
- Acknowledge their grief and loss
- Be honest
- Responses will vary

Practical ideas:

- PSHE/ Circle Time- different families
- Story Books:
 - Death I miss You
 - Always and Forever
 - Goodbye Mog
 - SAD
 - Badger's Parting Gift
- Breathing space - 'time out'

The pupil is given permission to leave class for a short time when beginning to feel out of control or just to get some personal space when upset. It is important that staff are made aware to avoid embarrassing scenes for either the pupil or the teacher. It is essential that the pupil does not just wander around the school but goes to a designated place and person. Identify a way in which the pupil can comfortably show they are struggling e.g. an item/card is carried with the pupil and

if the pupil signals to the teacher (item or card left on the desk/ shown to the teacher) the pupil may leave the room without having to ask.

- **Diary**

A way to communicate with a bereaved child who finds it difficult to verbalise feelings. The pupil leaves the diary in a mutually agreed place having written or drawn whatever they wish. The teacher responds in the diary and either leaves it to be picked up or discreetly returns it to the pupil.

- **Happy / sad faces**

The bereaved pupil has a sheet of paper or a paper plate with two drawings of faces on either side, one happy, one sad. The pupil shows the side the face that reflects how they are feeling on a particular day. This gives the teacher an idea of how they are and therefore which approach to use.

Procedure for Grief and Bereavement following the unexpected death of a parent.

Before the return to school following a bereavement

Met with family →listen to family's views/wishes

- Discussed what family had told the child
- Listened to their views (taking heed of their religious/spiritual beliefs)
- Agreed a strategy for return to school
- Discussed transition toys if appropriate
- Arranged communication with family

Met with staff →cascade information

- Met with all staff and made sure that they were aware of key facts and arrangements
- shared information sensitively with classmates before the child returned to school and used age-appropriate books in classes
- Shared information about bereavement with staff

- Discussed the curriculum and key dates and the impact they may have on the child

Return to school

- Key worker 'meet and greet'
- Family informed immediately if the staff had any concerns
- Weekly meeting with family, Pastoral staff and SENCo
- Pastoral Staff meet regularly with child to build a relationship
- Arrangements made for bereavement counselling in school
- Shared information with family regarding support from external agencies
- Staff and family aware of signs that a child is not coping
- Time given to listening to the child