

Bereavement Support and Guidance

When children or adults experience a significant loss, separation or bereavement they grieve. Grieving helps us to adapt to change and move on with our lives. If we do not grieve, we run the risk of carrying unresolved emotional issues into other parts of our lives. Understanding grief and the grieving process helps inform our ability to support these children and young people at this time.

We know from research and experience that children and young people benefit greatly when supported by their school in their grief journey.

The following information is to provide you with the knowledge, courage and the ability to take action towards becoming a better support provider when you find yourself in the situation.

Most grieving children do not need counselling. They need people who care. Schools, just by carrying on with their usual day-to-day activities while being aware of the bereavement, can do a huge amount to support a grieving pupil. They need sympathy, a listening ear and someone to talk to and acknowledge their grief.

Adults are often at a loss to know what to say or do to help a child who has been bereaved by the death of someone important to them. Every situation is different, and children will be affected to a greater or lesser degree, dependent on the circumstances of the death and the nature of their relationship they had with the person who has died. Children mature at different rates and their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age.

It is important to remember that children will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them. Children may need to look again at the details surrounding the death of an important person in their lives as they grow older. Feelings they had when young will be different several years further on as their understanding matures and the meaning of the death changes as they move through life. This is not unresolved grief but the experience of different feelings later in life, often connected to major life events.

Helping pupils to return to school

Liaise with family before the pupil returns to school

Having good contact with the family will enable you to access accurate information, to understand what the pupil has been told and to reassure those caring for the child. Speak with the parent/carer or the bereaved pupil if appropriate. Check how he/she feels about coming back to school and what he/she may want to happen.

Discuss the support that will be available on their return to school including a possible phased return or get them to come in at break time. This way they can talk to who they want to rather than being subjected to all kinds of questioning before school. Identify a key adult who will take the lead in these early days. All school staff will be informed of the bereavement and the pupil told that they know. Let the pupil know that his/her classmates know what has happened. If there is time get the class to write letters or cards which you could deliver to the home, assuring the pupil that his/her classmates are sorry to hear the news, but also looking forward to seeing him/her return to the classroom.

Acknowledge pupil's loss and offer sympathy privately on their return to school

When a pupil returns to school it is important to acknowledge the loss. You may wish to say something like "It is great to see you back at school. I am so sorry to hear about the death of your Daddy. Your class have missed you and we have all been praying for you and your family. Your class and all the staff know about the death of your Daddy." What would you like to happen now? It may be helpful to think through with them about how they can answer difficult questions others might ask them, or what to say if they don't want to talk about things at any time, for example, 'I don't feel ready to talk about it at the moment but thank you for asking'. Maybe have some of their best friends meet them and chat together in the staffroom before returning to class.

Adhere to the wishes of the pupils re acknowledging/not acknowledging their loss. Although all staff need to know of the bereavement, they may wish to acknowledge the loss in their own time to prevent the bereaved pupil being overwhelmed on their return to school.

Be supportive and available

Grief is a normal, healthy response, essential for healing and is a long-term process. All pupils will respond differently. Work, attention and behaviour may be affected by their emotional distress. It is normal for children and young people to be upset. Some pupils may display some changes in behaviour. They may have less concentration, be a lot more tired and therefore irritable, a heightened sensitivity to comments and remarks, and experiencing high levels of very strong emotions including anger and frustration about the death. Their reaction may be challenging for you. Everyone, child or adult, will grieve in their own way. Try not to make assumptions about what they should be doing, how they should be feeling or what is going to help. When not sure, ask the pupil or their family what they would like to happen. Knowing what to say is far less important than knowing how to listen. Normalise the grief reactions and suggest some activities that may help, e.g. breathing exercises, Finger holds, and time-out with key worker. When not sure, ask the pupil or their family what they would like to happen or what would help.

Use the correct words 'death' and 'dead' rather than euphemisms such as lost, passed or 'gone to sleep' and age appropriate materials when supporting a bereaved pupil.

Encourage established routines

Continue to expect the pupil to function, take cues from the pupil and respond sensitively. For a child or young person whose life has been turned upside down by bereavement, the routine of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may feel like it has fallen apart but school and the people within it can offer a sense of security and continuity. Keep in contact with home. Discuss concerns, but remember that successes are equally important. The family or carers will find this reassuring. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the pupil is coping.

For young children and adolescents, school can give relief from emotionally charged atmosphere at home. They may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family. There may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young people can find this difficult to deal with.

Children can be overlooked by family members struggling to deal with their own grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm. When a parent or sibling has died, children and young people can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief.

Maintain Pupil Loss Record

Once a pupil returns to school following a bereavement complete a record of this and place on pupil's file. Young people who have been supported by Child Bereavement UK have expressed how helpful it is when information about their circumstances is passed on so that they do not need to repeat their story at each transition point. It is useful to record special dates so that the death can be acknowledged later. This can be very comforting to the bereaved pupil.

If possible, prepare the pupil for the changes ahead, encourage them to share any concerns they may have and let them know who has been told about their bereavement and what was said. Transitions could include:

- Changing school
- Moving class/year group/tutor group
- Teacher changes