

Kew Woods Primary School



Bereavement Guidance May 2020

Rationale

We understand that bereavement is faced by members of our school community at different times and that when the loss is of a member of our school community - such as a child or staff member, it can be particularly difficult. Pupils need to be supported when they experience family bereavements and other significant losses in the course of their lives while they are at school.

This guidance will provide suggested guidelines to be followed after a bereavement. The aim is to be supportive to both pupils and adults, and for staff to have greater confidence and be better equipped to cope when bereavement happens. Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different and this framework has been constructed to guide on how to deal professionally, sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.

Following a Bereavement, we believe that children and adults alike have the right to:

- be given space and time to grieve
- be given support from whichever source is deemed the most appropriate - if possible, of their own choice.
- encounter a caring environment in which they feel safe to demonstrate grief without fear of judgement.

We recognise that:

- grief may not always be apparent to the onlooker, but its invisibility makes it no less real.
- differing religions/cultures view death and bereavement from different perspectives and all viewpoints should be taken into consideration and given equal value in the school environment.
- the death of a child has huge repercussions beyond the immediate teaching/care team of that child and every effort should be taken to inform and deal sensitively with the far reaching contacts.

The Management of Bereavement in School

A universally accepted procedure outline will, in itself, not enable everyone to feel comfortable in dealing with the practicalities of death and bereavement. Each bereavement is unique and comes with its own specific challenges; however, it is helpful to have a framework on which to build. One of our main concerns must be the immediate family of the deceased and as a school we state our commitment to any such family as may need practical, emotional and ongoing support.

The death of a pupil or member of staff

• Roles and responsibilities

Most grieving pupils do not need a 'bereavement expert', they need people who care. Schools, just by carrying on with their usual day-to-day activities, while acknowledging the bereavement, can do a huge amount to support a grieving child.

This bereavement framework offers guidance for all staff when dealing with death, grief and bereavement. This helps all members of staff to feel more confident to support a bereaved pupil. Having a 'bereavement aware' culture will ensure that all members of the school community feel supported.

This document is a framework to support dealing with death, grief and bereavement. This applies to supporting a bereaved child, family or member of staff within the school community. As every school is different and every situation unique, this framework is a flexible working document.

- This framework acts as a 'go to' guide, which is helpful when in shock or upset.
- It is proactive rather than reactive and creates a bereavement-aware culture.
- A suggestion of collectable resources to support bereaved pupils, other pupils, vulnerable staff, family/carers is given.

When a member of staff is informed of a death from a pupil's family, they will report the relevant information to the headteacher to cascade appropriately within the school. The headteacher may then appoint a member of staff to liaise with and support the child and family as an initial point of contact; this may be the class teacher.

When the headteacher is informed of the death of a member of staff, in partnership with the family, the headteacher will need to decide how to inform the rest of the staff, the children and then the school community. How to celebrate the life of the member of staff will also need to be discussed.

• **The first few days and returning to school**

School, with its familiar environment and routines, can be a place of comfort for a bereaved young person.

Some pupils want to return to school as soon as they can, and most will return after a few days. If they take too much time off, it can make the return more daunting and difficult.

Arrange to meet with the pupil and their family/carers to plan their return to school. Agree strategies to help them manage their grief when they are in school.

It is important for the school and family to manage a child's return, ensuring that the pupil settles back in with the least amount of anxiety and stress. Avoid making assumptions based on culture or family background; always ask to find out the beliefs and thoughts of a family so that home and school can provide consistent support.

Before a child returns to school, try to speak to the family so that you're aware of the cause of death and what the child has been told about it. It can be helpful to set up a meeting with the family/carers, the pupil and significant adults in school to discuss their return, and find out what they need and what they can expect from school. Pass on information to all staff. Let the pupil ease back into schoolwork and don't expect too much from them in terms of homework. Liaise with their carers about setting short-term, achievable targets. Try to find out what they enjoy doing and give them opportunities to do these things. They need to know that it's okay to have fun and that it doesn't mean that they are no longer sad or missing the person, just because they are enjoying themselves

• **The funeral**

Bereaved families may ask for support or advice on whether to take a child to a funeral. The following may help with a discussion with either a child or adult

- Many adults have clear opinions on whether children should attend a funeral. This may be based on their own experiences, cultural beliefs or they may simply be trying to protect a young person from too "adult" a ritual.
- Many children do not know what a funeral is and may feel anxious about the event. Adults in school can help by explaining what a funeral is and giving the bereaved child the chance to ask questions and share any concerns.

- Children need to understand what a funeral is and what will happen, so they can make an informed choice about whether to attend. Very few children regret choosing to attend the funeral of someone special to them. Those who are not given the option often deeply resent not being included, despite this decision having been made with the best of intentions. (This may depend on who has died and the relationship with the family.)
- For some children and their families, having members of staff from school can be reassuring, others may see it as an intrusion; it is best to check with a family before attending a funeral.
- A family may wish to keep a funeral private or may welcome members of the school community. It is important to communicate with the family to find out what they would prefer, just asking this will show that the school cares.
- If a member of staff has died, the head may take the decision to close the school to enable all colleagues and friends to attend.

• Support for pupils

Bereaved children often find change difficult and the transition to a new school year, new teacher or new school can be particularly daunting. Passing on details of the bereavement, including important dates, to subsequent teachers/schools should ensure continued support and understanding for the child (Mother's Day, Father's Day, birthdays etc can be occasions when children might find it hard to cope).

If possible, prepare the child for the changes ahead encouraging them to share any concerns they may have. Develop their resilience by reminding them how they have coped with previous changes and how they are ready for new challenges in the future. School provides the stability and normality which may be lacking at home following a bereavement.

Most pupils do not need specialist interventions as familiar and trusted adults in school can be a reassuring presence for a bereaved child.

- Offer simple choices and allow a bereaved child to express their opinions in school; this will give them the chance to take some control over at least one aspect of their life.
- Keep them informed about lessons or situations which may affect them and offer alternatives where possible.
- Talk to the child to find out what they need; this will help them to feel cared for and supported.
- Although they may choose a particular trusted and supportive adult in school, make sure other members of staff talk to the child to prevent a bereaved pupil becoming too dependent on just one adult in school.
- Rather than asking how they are, more specific questions may be easier for a bereaved to child answer and give a better insight into how they are coping.
 - How are you managing your studies/homework?
 - How are things at home?
 - How are you getting on with your friends?
 - Are your friends being supportive?
 - Is there anything else we can help with in school?
- Clear, open and honest communication will ensure that members of school staff have the information they need to support a bereaved child.
- It is essential to find out what a bereaved child has been told by their family/carers and what they understand of this information.

- Ask a bereaved child what they need and how they would like to manage their grief in school.
- Check in with other children to make sure they have the skills needed to support a bereaved friend.
- Make sure other members of staff are aware of the bereavement, and the child's wishes, so that school provides a consistent approach.
- Inform members of the wider community as necessary to ensure a consistent approach.

• **Support for families**

Bereaved families may look to school for help and guidance when someone has died.

- Grieving adults can sometimes struggle to support young people and manage their own grief.
- Sharing information with families and carers can be very welcome.
- Building and maintaining good relationships with a bereaved child's family and/or carers means that information and support can be shared between home and school.
- It can be helpful to signpost to support organisations, where necessary.

• **Longer term support**

- There is no time limit on bereavement and young people feel upset and angry when it is suggested they "should be over it by now."
- In time, children may seem better but it is important for adults in school to remember that they will continue to grieve for the rest of their life.
- As children grow up, their understanding of death matures and they may have unresolved questions about the death or the person who died.
- They may view the bereavement from a different perspective, which can bring about fresh emotions of grief.
- A nurturing school environment will help a bereaved child to feel supported and able to share their feelings and ask questions.
- Bereaved children can find it difficult to tell people that someone important to them has died, so this information should be shared with staff on transition.
- If key dates (such as the anniversary of the death or birthday) are noted, it will be helpful as a bereaved child may feel more vulnerable at certain times of the year.
- Other activities in school can be difficult for a bereaved child, this could be parents' evening, school prom or Mother's/Father's Day. A curriculum topic may also trigger memories.
- If grief unexpectedly overwhelms a child, offer them a "time-out". Follow up to find out how they are feeling and whether they need any additional support.
- Sharing bereavement information with subsequent teachers and schools is important.
- Consider school activities or areas of the curriculum which may make a bereaved child feel vulnerable - try to prepare them in advance, where possible.
- Check how they are managing their grief and review strategies.
- Be aware that the child may try to 'mask' their feelings

• **Death, grief and bereavement in the curriculum**

Teaching the topic of death, grief and bereavement will help pupils to understand feelings of grief and prepare them for the future. Informing parents and carers in advance will help to gather information about previous bereavements so that vulnerable pupils can be prepared for the lesson.

Recently bereaved pupils may find it helpful if they are given the option to work elsewhere or step outside, if they think it would be too painful to attend.

- **Support for staff**

Supporting bereaved pupils can be very stressful for staff who may already be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. At certain points in time, some members of staff may be more vulnerable due to circumstances in their own lives. They need to know where and to whom they can go for support.

Appendix A - Supporting a bereaved pupil; creative ideas for capturing memories

An activity can support a child to communicate. Engagement in an activity often negates the need for a child to have eye contact and may help free them up to share their thoughts, feelings and memories. It also affords you an opportunity to work alongside the child to support them

- **Memory box** - Choose a suitable box or tin with a lid — this could be a box file, printer paper box, old gift box or biscuit tin. You could even make it out of cardboard or wood. Encourage the pupil to personalise it and decorate it themselves. Allow them to fill it with their own special memories, these may be items or memories written on pieces of material or paper. Things you might include: • Photographs (if available); the pupil could draw a picture; write the memory as a story, poem, song, comic strip etc; cut a picture from a magazine or print one out to show a favourite place, food, colour, sports team, film, band, type of music, hobby or interest. • Explore ideas of objects which they could put in the box to help them remember their special person. • Actual items, replicas or pictures — such as a piece of fabric from an item of clothing (or a similar fabric to represent it), a recipe for a food they enjoyed, the title of a book/film/TV programme they shared together, letters to tell their special person what they are doing or how they are feeling. • Abstract objects which could be chosen by the pupil to represent a particular memory or assigned to a significant meaning for the pupil — these could be gems, coloured stickers, pebbles, pieces of ribbon, buttons, feathers etc.
- **Memory Book** - Use a scrapbook, ring binder, photograph album or make one from pieces of sugar paper. The pupil can personalise it and decorate the front cover. If photographs are available these could be stuck in — pupils could write additional details, thoughts or comments or an adult could scribe if necessary. It is useful to include a large envelop for inclusion of special items which cannot be stuck down. What to include? • Pictures drawn of special memories/days shared with special person. • Poems or stories about the person, a specific memory or about how much they are missed. • Letters written to the person. • Pieces of artwork or collages made in school which the bereaved pupil may want to keep in their scrapbook.
- **A memory cloud made up of words associated with the special person**
- **E-Memory Store** - Consider collating memories electronically — using photographs and other electronic memories — messages, emails, pictures etc. These could be animated - Additional content such as messages, letters, pictures or memories could be added. These could be stored or used to create an image or film montage. - It is important that these memories are backed up and that all relevant policies are adhered to.

Appendix B - Books on Bereavement

GRANPA John Burningham (Puffin, 1998, ISBN 0099-43408-3) Designed to stimulate discussion rather than to tell a story, the book has a series of scenes of a little girl and her grandad, with comments from each or both of them. At the end, she is shown staring at his empty chair, without comments. The book allows the adult to direct discussion about not only the good things that the child remembers, but also the not so happy memories.

WHEN DINOSAURS DIE L & M Brown (Little, Brown, 1996, hb, ISBN 0-316-10197-7) Charming busy anthropomorphic pictures of dinosaurs illustrate topics and questions and a range of answers about death: Saying Goodbye; Customs and beliefs about death; Why do people die? What does "dead" mean?. It is also quite acute psychologically, acknowledging that disbelief, anger, fear, and sadness are common feelings when someone dies. Expensive, but attractive and appealing to children.

REMEMBERING GRANDAD Sheila and Kate Isherwood (Oxford, ISBN 0-19-272368-5) A girl's grandfather has died and looking back over the happy times they enjoyed together helps her to cope with the loss. Very specific episodes and illustrations give it a life-like feel. Sensible and sound if a little stereotyped in its pictures of family life, it could help children to think about how to remember someone.

FRED Posy Simmons (Jonathan Cape, 1987, ISBN 0-2240-2448-5) When Fred the cat dies, his owners Nick and Sophie attend his funeral and learn about his secret life as a famous singer. The story raises the idea of celebrating a life in a good-humoured and touching way, with entertaining pictures and not much text.

GRANDAD, I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU De Bode and Broere (Evans / Helping Hands, 1997, ISBN 0237-51755-8) A picture book about loss and memories, and potentially a good stimulus to talk about a bereavement.

LIFETIMES Beginnings and endings with lifetimes in between - a beautiful way to explain life and death to children Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (Belitha Press, 1997, ISBN 1-85561-760-9). places human life and death firmly in the natural world, and the tone is quietly reflective: "All around us everywhere, beginnings and endings are going on all the time. It may be sad, but it is the way of all things. For plants; for people; and for birds".

BADGER'S PARTING GIFTS Susan Varley (Collins Picture Lions, pb, 1992) An old favourite, a charming illustrated book in which a very old and much loved badger dies. The forest animals gather and reminisce about the important part Badger played in their lives, and as time passes memories of Badger make them smile. These memories were different for each of them, including very recognisable things like a favourite recipe or showing someone how to knot a tie - Badger's "parting gifts"

WE LOVE THEM Martin Waddell (Walker Books, 1990, ISBN 0-7445-7256-8) Death is seen very much as part of life in this nicely illustrated story of life in the country, which conveys the idea that life goes on and that old creatures give way to young ones. But it is a bit too matter of fact about loss - barely is the old dog dead than the children have found a new one, is there an implicit message that dead pets (and people?) are easily replaced.

GRANDMA'S BILL Martin Waddell (Macdonald Young Books, pb, ISBN 0-7500-0307-3) Bill's grandma is a widow, and he learns about her "other Bill" by looking through her photo album with her. A bit too stereotypically suburban and middle class for general appeal perhaps. Some like its ordinariness, gentleness and factual accuracy, and couldn't fault what it had to say about death and living on in memories and in the family.

I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU H Wilhelm (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985) A touching story of the love between a little boy and his dog, who have grown up together. When the dog dies, the boy says that, although he is very sad, it helps that he used to tell the dog "I'll always love you" every night. An opportunity to discuss the importance of telling how you feel. Aimed at 4 to 7 year olds and delightfully illustrated.

A BIRTHDAY PRESENT FOR DANIEL Juliet Rothman (Prometheus Books, ISBN 1-57392-054-1) This story of a little girl whose brother has died is intended for children aged 8-12. "A difficult subject handled very well and movingly".

Appendix C - Extra reading

Supporting pupils

The following guidelines are taken from CRUSE bereavement care website. They are general principles, and need to be thought about whatever the needs of the child are.

- Children and young people need to be given the opportunity to grieve as any adult would. Trying to ignore or avert the child's grief is not protective, in fact it can prove to be extremely damaging as the child enters adulthood. Children and young people regardless of their age need to be encouraged to talk about how they are feeling and supported to understand their emotions.

- It is also important to remember that children and young people grieve in different ways. Grief is unique and therefore it is not wise to assume that all children and young people will experience the same emotions, enact the same behaviour or respond similarly to other grieving children and young people. A child or young person's grief differs from that of an adult's grief because it alters as they develop.

- Children and young people often revisit the death and review their emotions and feelings about their bereavement as they move through their stages of development. Children and young people do not have the emotional capacity to focus on their grief for long periods of time and therefore it is not uncommon for grieving children and young people to become distracted by play. This is a protective mechanism which allows the child or young person to be temporarily diverted from the bereavement.

- Bereaved children and young people need time to grieve and in order for them to address the bereavement they need to be given the facts regarding the death in language appropriate to their age or level of comprehension. Avoid using metaphors for death such as, "Daddy has gone to sleep", this will make the child or young person believe that Daddy will come back to them and may constantly ask when he is going to wake up. Similarly the child or young person might encounter problems with bedtime and not wanting to sleep for fear of not waking up.

- It is understandable that many caregivers are reluctant to talk to the child or young person about the death as they do not want to cause distress or fear. Children and young people who are bereaved need to know that their loved one has died, how they died and where they are now. Failure to be honest with the grieving child or young person means that their grief is not being acknowledged and this can cause problems later on.

- If the bereaved child or young person wants to ask questions about death and what dying means, answer them truthfully and if you do not know the answer to a specific question don't be tempted to make the answer up. Assure the child or young person that although you do not know the answer to their question you will find out for them.