

St Augustine's CE (VA) Primary School

Bereavement Policy 2020



(review June 2021)

ST AUGUSTINE'S CE (VA) J & I SCHOOL

Bereavement POLICY

Spring 2020

Aim

The main aim of this policy is to provide a framework for staff in understanding bereavement, its effects and what we can do to help members of our community in this situation. Approximately 1 in 29 children and young people have experienced bereavement of a parent or sibling – that is about the same as one child in every school classroom in the country. These deaths are one of the most fundamental losses a child will ever experience. The term 'bereavement' refers to the process of grieving and mourning and is associated with a deep sense of loss and sadness. It is a natural process; however its effects can be overwhelming.

Our Approach

Acknowledge the death

The most important thing that a member of staff can do for a bereaved child is acknowledge the death and give the individual the space and opportunity to talk about it. This is true for members of the family and other staff who have suffered a bereavement too. Remember the worst has already happened and nothing you say will make it worse.

Opportunity for the child to express their thoughts and feelings

All children respond to bereavement differently but it is important that they all know there is the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings if they want to, whether this be through talk, play or creatively. Dependent on the child's wishes it might be useful to have a key worker for the child – ideally someone they already have a good relationship with. This is the person who the child can go to if they need to talk and allows them opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in a safe space. There is no time limit on support and we have a full-time learning mentor who can be accessed as the 'key worker' where appropriate or as an additional adult to support the child through this process.

Supporting a bereaved child with SEN

Children and young people with SEN are sometimes assumed to need protection from death and dying more than most or that they do not have the capacity to understand, this is very often not the case. 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.

Contact with the family

When the school is made aware of a bereavement the family should be contacted as soon as possible and support offered. Bereavement can be one of the most difficult things that a family goes through and just the knowledge that you have got the support of the school community and that you are not alone can be a comfort.

It would be useful to find out from the family how much and what the child knows and what (if anything) they would want communicated with the rest of the school community. This should be done in a sensitive way and where possible a key contact set up for the family who can support all communications between school and home. Every family will react differently to a bereavement so the support offered (including 'check in' phone calls) should be tailored to the needs of the family. Open communication with the family will allow for the best picture of how the child is coping and whether more (or different) support needs to be accessed.

Informing staff, pupils and families of a death

Please see Appendix C – Informing staff, pupils and families. This is a policy and procedures aid from Winston's Wish which has been split into 3 sections to cover the 3 different groups of people. It also has information for if there has been a high-profile death and there is media involvement.

Transition

It is vitally important to ensure that if a child has experienced bereavement that this information is passed on to the relevant persons when they move on to a new class or school.

Curriculum

Children and young people explore the concept of loss, bereavement and grief as part of the PSHE curriculum. Assemblies may also be used to address aspects of death e.g. Remembrance Day or commemorative occasions. Any questions relating to loss or death will be answered in a sensitive and age-appropriate whilst being honest and factual with no metaphors used. Please see Appendix B for information on how children understand death at different ages.

Where important days and potentially difficult topics e.g. Father's day, are covered in school, thought will be put into planning these sessions and how they may impact bereaved pupils and ways this could be managed e.g. where appropriate discussions with the child and or family prior to the event to ask how they might want to manage it may be useful.

Support for Staff

Supporting bereaved pupils will be stressful for staff who may already be struggling with their own reactions and emotions. Within school we have a staff well-being team who can offer support and signposting to external agencies where appropriate.

Staff Bereavement

Where it is a member of staff that has suffered a bereavement we will follow the same approach as for children and their families. We are all part of the same community and will support each other as such.

Absences and exam dispensations

Following bereavement there may be absences from school and or the need for exam dispensations. Both will be handled sensitively and reviewed on a case by case basis.

Support and resources for children, families and staff

Where needed the learning mentor and SENDCO can be key contacts in school to offer support and signpost children, families and staff to the relevant support and resources. Please see Appendix A for further information on support and resources available.

Safeguarding

Staff should be aware of other factors which could be aggravated by bereavement (e.g. mental health of the child or parent) and take these into account when working with the family. They should make sure that safeguarding procedures are still followed and where appropriate safeguarding measures are in place.

Confidentiality

Sharing of information will be kept to a minimum, be in line with the needs of the individual and with our data protection policy. We will discuss with the bereaved child and their family which adults in the school community they would like made aware of the experiences impacting on the child. If a child is suffering from trauma, we will share this as appropriate with staff, but not necessarily the details of their experience. We will use our usual school systems (CPOMs) to record when a child has suffered a bereavement.

Appendix A: Support and resources for children, families and staff

Resources for staff supporting bereaved individuals

Winston's wish offers free online training courses and resources to support staff:

- [Childhood Bereavement: An introduction](#)
- [What can you do to help](#)
- [Guide to supporting grieving children in education](#)
- [Charter for bereaved children](#)

Resources to use with children

All resources should be assessed on a case by case basis to make sure they meet the needs of the child and are appropriate in terms of age and the family's wishes etc

- Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine – there is a paper copy in the Pastoral room
 - This is an activity book to help when someone has died. This book can be used to help children make sense of their experience by reflecting on the different aspects of their grief, whilst finding a balance between remembering and having fun.
- Elephant Tea party – there is a paper copy in the Pastoral room and SENDCO has an electronic copy
 - The Elephant's Tea Party is an initiative for schools that raises the topics of death and grief in a sensitive and age-appropriate way. It helps teachers give children the emotional literacy and life skills needed to equip them for bereavement, now and in later life.
- ELSA bereavement support pack - there is a paper copy in the Pastoral room and SENDCO has an electronic copy
 - A range of resources and activities for staff to use to support children who are suffering bereavement.

Websites with downloadable resources

- [Childhood Bereavement Network](#): Resources to support children during coronavirus
- [Lions Life Skills](#): Resource packs for ages 3 – 16, with a free downloadable sample pack.
- [Simon Says](#): General bereavement support, has a section with downloadable resources.
- [Nurture UK](#): Free bereavement downloadable guide
- [Dying Matters](#): A whole section with downloadable leaflets and information.

Support for Families

- [Rowens Hospice](#): Downloadable PDF '*Small Book of Big Conversations*'
- [Bereavement support services available in Calderdale](#)
- [Calderdale Help in Bereavement Service](#) – a free, confidential service available to anyone who has suffered a bereavement.
- [Child bereavement UK](#)
- [Cruse bereavement – help for families](#)
- [Winston's wish](#)

Appendix B: How age and stage can affect understanding of grief

Information from Winston's wish - A guide to supporting grieving children and young people in education document)

Early Years Education – aged 3 to 5 – Preschool and Reception

When a child this young experiences the death of someone important, it is important they are helped to know about the person as an integral part of their history. Young children often ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to understand their loss. They are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that our explanations aren't good enough. Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss. At this age, they may not understand that death is permanent or that it happens to every living thing. A 4-year-old may be able to tell others confidently that 'my daddy's dead' and may even be able to explain how 'he was hit by a car and he died'. However, the next sentence may be: 'I hope he'll be back before my birthday' or 'He's picking me up tonight'. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat breathe and keep warm. It is important to give them simple, factual information and tell them that once someone has died, their body stops working so they don't feel pain anymore and they don't feel hot or cold and they don't need to eat or drink anything. Children's thoughts are concrete and characterised by "magical thinking". They may struggle to understand abstract concepts (such as heaven) or roundabout ways of explaining death (e.g. 'gone to sleep'). Children may believe it was something they said or did that caused the death or they may believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the person back. They need to be reassured that the death was not their fault and gently reminded that the person will not come back. By using concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and giving specific explanations about why the person died can help. It is important to maintain a routine as normal as possible for the child. It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to younger behaviours such as separation anxiety, incontinence, and use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Being tolerant and managing the separation will be helpful for the child and the family. In time, it is most likely these earlier behaviour patterns will disappear once 'new normal' family routines are established.

Key Stage 1 – Ages 5 to 7 – Years 1 and 2

Children of this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent; however, some confusion may still stand. When first told of the death, younger children may be mainly concerned with the 'when' and 'where' of the death. They may express concerns about their own future such as: 'What will happen to me? Who will meet me after school? Will I still go to Cubs?' Giving reassurance about everyday activities and arrangements continuing as normal, or clear explanations about alternative arrangements, will be helpful for the child. Children may become clingy or more reluctant to see parents and carers leave. There may be a need to stick close to their parent to protect them from the mysterious occurrence that made their dad disappear or at least to be with them if it happens again. Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal, but it is important that routines are maintained while gently acknowledging when someone important dies we feel things like sadness and worry in our bodies too. They can also feel that in some way they were responsible

for the death, e.g. 'I was angry with him and shouted at him when he left for work because he wouldn't fix my bike. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's my fault.' It can be worth saying something like: 'You do know, don't you, that nothing you said or did made this happen?'

Key Stage 2 – Ages 7 to 11 – Years 3, 4, 5 and 6

As children begin to understand more about death and dying, a death in the family may make them anxious about the health and safety of surviving members of the family. They may feel very responsible for their parent(s) and younger siblings and feel the need to keep a close eye on their safety. Children this age can find it difficult to talk about their bereavement and express their feelings behaviourally, such as withdrawing from others or showing increased aggression. They may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers, particularly as the death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else. It is important to avoid clichés like "You're being so brave" as children can interpret this as they should not share their feelings. They may need a safe space or quiet area away from peers to calm down or express their emotions with an adult. Children of this age also show curiosity about issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear, factual explanations. Children can also think of death as something spooky, like a zombie, or a spirit that comes to get you. Normalising feelings, talking about or drawing specific worries and sharing bad dreams can be reassuring, giving children skills and confidence to feel more in charge of them. By the age of 10, children will usually have all of the bits of the jigsaw puzzle of understanding. They will even understand that they are able to cause their own death. They will appreciate clear and detailed information – beyond 'when', 'where' and 'how' the death happened, they will be interested in 'why'.

Appendix C – Informing staff, pupils and families

Informing staff and governors of a death within the school community

A death can affect the school community in different ways and depends on:

- The role that the deceased person had in school.
- How well known they were in the local community.
- Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide, or other violent or sudden deaths.

The experience of working with many schools affected by death has taught Winston's Wish that adults and children benefit from being kept informed of a death. Rumour and gossip can be very damaging and can lead to both young and old developing the attitude that the death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity and if they are not informed of the circumstances, or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be affected.

The following guidelines may help when informing staff and governors:

- Arrange a staff meeting as soon as practicable. Identify absent staff.
- If a death has occurred in a holiday period make sure that all staff are informed. Some schools have a 'snow' or other urgent communication system in place that could be used.
- Tell the story of what happened leading up to the death.
- Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred.
- Be prepared for obvious upset and feelings of anger/guilt. People may connect the incident to their own personal experience of bereavement, so feelings about past bereavements may need to be discussed. This is perfectly natural.
- To enable absent staff to feel part of a caring team, arrangements should be made to inform them over the telephone if a personal visit is impractical. Consider the relationship between the absent colleague and deceased.
- For a death that may attract media coverage (e.g. if the member of staff was a well-known personality or died tragically), identify a nominated spokesperson (e.g. Head Teacher, Chair of Governors) to provide a 'news statement' at an agreed time, as a way of dealing with media intrusion. Liaison with the individual's family is essential, prior to reporting information to the media, in order to respect their privacy and wishes.
- Establish good lines of communication with all relevant parties, this will always include family and staff, in other cases it may involve communication with emergency services, health, the Educational Psychology service, Social Care, and other support services.
- Provide details of someone who can be available to talk things through with a member of staff, parent or child if they are finding the situation particularly hard. This person could advise the family of support services available if required.
- Nominate staff to prepare a letter to parents and carers, an example letter is in the 'informing parents' section at the end of this document.

- Provide staff with a script about what has happened so that consistent information is given to all of the pupils. Include where possible some answers to difficult questions that staff may be asked by the children, to prevent them needing to think of appropriate responses on the spot.
- Encourage everyone to consider how to meet their own support needs and take care of themselves, this may be from friends, family, support services and/or buddying up with other members of staff. Provide contact details for support in your local area.
- We recognise that speed and chaos may be a major factor on a day when a critical incident has happened – the speed and chaos meaning that constantly referring to plans and lists is not possible. DONT WORRY! Be confident enough to go with your gut instinct. Remember that keeping people as informed as possible is always helpful, and don't bear all the responsibility yourself, share it round.
- Trained and experienced practitioners are available on the Winston's Wish Freephone National Helpline (08088 020 021) should you want to check out ideas throughout the day.

Informing children and young people

People often think that children do not grieve, but even very young children will want to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly of all, what happens next?

The following guidelines will help you to inform children of the death of a teacher or other member of staff:

- Identify those children who had a long-term and/or close relationship with the deceased to be told together as a separate group. Where possible inform all the pupils in the smallest group practicable. Class or tutor groups are ideal.
- Take account of pupils with specific needs including: pupils with past history of loss; pupils with a learning disability and pupils who have difficulty managing their emotions or behaviour.
- Experience has shown that it is more beneficial if all pupils are informed.
- It is always a shock when a death occurs in a school even if it may have been anticipated. In the eyes of the pupils, teachers are part of the fittings and fixtures in school and are not expected to die. Children expect to live forever, and so a fellow pupil dying whilst still young enough to attend school can also feel quite shocking. Provide staff with guidelines on how to inform children. For example:
 - "I've got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. I know most of you will have heard of cancer, and know that sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it. Mrs Smith, the Geography teacher and Year 11 tutor, has been ill with cancer for a long time. I have to tell you that Mrs Smith died yesterday in hospital".
 - "Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. Sadly, there are some accidents that cause people to die. I have some really sad news to tell you that might upset you. Yesterday Stephen, who is in Year 4, was in an accident and he was so badly injured that he died".
 - Refer to the person's name naturally, "Mrs Smith died from cancer".

- Children and young people will appreciate time to verbalise their feelings and fears. Allow space for “If onlys...” to be acknowledged.
- Discussion – allow pupils to share their own experiences of death, e.g. “When my pet/my gran died” etc.
- Be honest about your own feelings and experiences and talk openly about the relationship that you had with the person.
- Answer pupil’s questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like ‘passed away’, or ‘lost’ etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children.
- Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care.
- Plan and arrange how the school will collectively acknowledge the loss and remember the person, for instance with an assembly, memory book, and maybe in time a permanent memorial (garden, tree, bench, award...). Our Guide to supporting grieving children and young people in education has some notes on school assemblies. • It is natural that children may be upset and/or need time to process information, make sure there is a quiet space for them to go to, support available for them both immediately afterwards and in the days that follow.

Informing parents of the death of a pupil

It is vital that parents and carers are provided with information as soon as possible so that they can support their children and help them make sense of what has happened.

There is an example of a letter to parents below. Please feel free to change it according to the needs of the situation.

Use the text system for informing parents, for instance texting parents to let them know that they have been sent a letter or that there is an important letter for them to pick up when they collect their child from school.

As with any other issues the Winston’s Wish Helpline is happy to offer advice on the wording of these type of letters in relation to different causes of death or other specific circumstances, information is also available on our website.

Example Letter to Parents - 1

Dear Parents

Your child’s class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the tragic death of <Name>, who has been a teacher at this school for years. Our thoughts are with <Name’s> family at this time and in an effort to try and respond to his/her death in a positive manner, all children have been informed. The children were told that <Name> died from an asthma attack on <Date>. A number of pupils have been identified as being asthmatic and <Name>, the School Nurse has today reassured them that it is unusual for a person to die from asthma. When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings - sadness, anger, and confusion - which are all normal. The children have been

told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

Yours sincerely