



Grief Support for Children and  
Young People in Oxfordshire

# Supporting bereaved pupils in school

SeeSaw's Information Pack for Schools





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Also included: *(further copies available from SeeSaw)*

A5 teacher's quick reference leaflet - "Supporting bereaved pupils in school",

SeeSaw leaflet – "Grief support for the young in Oxfordshire"

Pocket-sized young person's leaflet. – "Getting Through Grief"



## Supporting bereaved pupils in school SeeSaw's Information Pack for Schools

Written by Christine Druce with grateful acknowledgement to those school staff and other professionals whose comments and suggestions helped shape the final document.

These sheets can be photocopied for use within your own setting.  
Further packs are available from SeeSaw.



## CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Children's understanding of death will vary with their age and stage of development. Young children may not have the language or cognitive ability to tell you how they feel, so adults have to interpret their behaviour in order to offer appropriate support. Likewise for adolescents who, although they have the understanding and language, are often unwilling to talk to the adults around them!

### Pre-school children

- Realise that someone they love is missing from their lives – but their response is more about the loss of the person, not their death. Are sensitive to the emotional atmosphere around them
- Do not understand the finality of death – they think that the person will come back or can be visited, so often react casually to bad news and continue to ask when they will return.
- May show signs of anger or sadness, but often only for short periods before escaping into play.
- May use play to act out their understanding of what happened– repeated play is often the way children try and make sense of life experiences.
- May seem to transfer their attachment to another person quickly for security.
- May regress in language and behaviour – the skills they had mastered may be lost for a while
- May ask the same questions over and over again as they try and make sense of the “story”.
- Will have a strong need for routine, structure, affection, reassurance – to feel safe.

### Primary school children

- Begin to understand the permanency of death – may lead to separation anxiety.
- Begin to fear death for themselves and others – might worry about ghosts/the dark etc.
- May feel guilt or experience “magical thinking” (i.e. my thoughts/actions caused the death).
- Still may not have mastery over language to adequately express complex feelings.
- Often need to know details of the death and will ask specific questions to try and make sense of the situation. May need to go over facts again and again.
- May exhibit acting out, attention seeking or regressive behaviour as a vehicle for their feelings
- May have difficulty concentrating or settling at school – have aggressive or distressed outbursts
- May suffer from minor illnesses, or mirror symptoms that the ill person experienced
- Continue to have strong need for routine, structure, verbal and non-verbal expressions of affection and reassurance in order to feel safe in a world which has suddenly become unsafe and scary.

### Secondary school children

- Understand that death is final and irreversible – may become depressed/feel overwhelmed.
- Have appropriate language to identify feelings but may be unwilling to discuss issues.
- May become obsessed with thoughts of own death, or that of others.
- May act recklessly in defiance of death – drugs, alcohol, sexual activity, fast driving, etc.
- Dislike appearing different from peers so may deny feelings and reject offers of support.
- May question/reject beliefs, values and religion as a result of experiencing loss.
- Become aware of the impact of their loss on future life events which will never be shared.
- May withdraw from academic/social activities due to changed circumstances.
- May become work focussed in an attempt to blot out pain or compensate for loss.

**Loss happens to children of all ages – it does not wait for them to be old enough to understand**



## CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO BEREAVEMENT

**Bereavement** is what happens to us, **grief** is what we feel and **mourning** is what we do.

Grief is a distressing and overwhelming experience that affects us emotionally, physically, behaviourally and spiritually. Reactions vary, may not occur immediately, and will depend on a number of factors. It can help pupils to know that the following reactions are all normal responses to the death of someone we love.

### Factors affecting the way children grieve:-

- Their age, stage of development and understanding of life and death
- Degree of attachment to the person who has died
- Previous experience of illness, loss and death
- Manner of death – long illness, suicide, accident
- How and what they were told of the death
- Availability of support networks – at home and at school
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Ethnic and cultural background – specific belief system/rituals

### Some of the normal *emotional* reactions to bereavement might be:

- *Shock/numbness* – pupil may not show any immediate reaction as they struggle to absorb the implications of the news. Young children may continue to appear unaffected for sometime
- *Denial/disbelief* – Initially pupil may find it hard to accept the death – “*I can't believe she is not here*” – and continue to talk about the dead person in the present tense
- *Panic/separation anxiety* – pupil may fear own or other's death, feels vulnerable/world is unsafe.
- *Sadness* – pupil may be tearful /prone to sudden emotional outbursts
- *Anger* – may be expressed in words or behaviour – signals intense pain and frustration
- *Guilt* –pupil may feel something they did/said contributed to the death.
- *Exhaustion* – grief can be physically and emotionally draining – irregular sleeping or eating patterns
- *Despair* – pupil may feel emotionally overwhelmed, nothing will ever be right again.
- *Helplessness* – pupil feels out of control of events.
- *Regret* – for things said/not said, for hopes and wishes that will not now happen
- *Loneliness* – there is no one else who is experiencing what I am feeling and going through.
- *Lowered self esteem* – as a result of changed circumstances and abilities.

### Some of the normal *physical* reactions to bereavement might be:

Distress, tiredness, minor illnesses, loss of appetite, self neglect, decrease in activity, panic attacks, nausea, headaches, feeling cold, dry mouth, shivering, exhaustion, sighing.

### Some of the normal *behavioural* reactions to bereavement might be:

Aggression, crying, restlessness, inability to concentrate, forgetfulness, detachment, loss of motivation, separation anxiety, school refusal, disorganisation, regression.

**“Grief is the intense and painful pining for, and preoccupation with, somebody or something now lost”**

(Murray Parkes 2007)



## HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH GRIEF

**Most grieving children do not need specialist help.** Much of the support needed is similar to that which you would give to any vulnerable child and is simply an extension of your existing professional teaching and listening skills. Therefore, you might find the following reminders (adapted from “Healing and Growing Through Grief” by Donna O’Toole.) helpful when supporting a bereaved pupil in your care

- **Be there.** Grieving children need your support and presence more than advice. Support may be needed over a long period of time. Children often jump in and out of the “puddles” of grief – lack of obvious grief reactions does not mean that they have forgotten or that grief has gone away.
- **Initiate and anticipate.** Intensely grieving children often don’t know or can’t ask for what they need, so watch out for behaviours which might indicate that the child is struggling and perhaps offer special times when they could talk to you if they wished.
- **Listen.** Grieving children often need to tell their stories repeatedly. Listening without judgement or interruption can be the most important gift you can give.
- **Silence is golden.** Sometimes there are no words that bring enough comfort to take away the pain. Presence and touch can sometimes say what words cannot.
- **Accept and encourage the expression of feelings.** Reassure the child that grief encompasses many different feelings including anger, sadness, confusion, helplessness, guilt – all are normal and sometimes it helps to talk about or find ways to express what they are experiencing.
- **Offer opportunities for remembering.** Often grieving children (and adults) find that having the opportunity to talk about special memories can be helpful. Young children worry about forgetting
- **Learn about the grief process.** Knowledge helps allay anxieties. (See book list).
- **Help the child find support and encouragement.** Help the bereaved child explore what support they need and who will give it to them. Think about social as well as academic support.
- **Allow the child to grieve at their own pace.** Grief is an individual process. Your ability to not judge the length of time it takes will help. Reactions may not occur until sometime after the death
- **Be patient...** With yourself and with your pupil. You may need to give more of yourself over a longer period than you imagined. Make sure you too have some support. (See section on “Looking after Yourself”)
- **Provide for times of fun.** Grief can be exhausting. Let the child know that it is still OK to laugh and have fun – it does not mean they are being disloyal to the person who died, or by enjoying themselves they will forget what happened, but living is important too.
- **Give a child choices.** When the rest of life feels out of their control it helps if children can be involved in decisions about what sort of support can be given at home and at school.
- **Believe in the child’s ability to recover and grow.** Your faith in their ability to recover and heal may be needed when theirs fails them. Help them identify their strengths and build on their inner resources, as well as identifying those around them who can offer support.
- **Be yourself!** You are a child’s best resource – your ability to understand, stay constant and keep school routines and boundaries in place will create a sense of safety when all else is in chaos

“Time cannot heal a broken heart, but it can teach us how to learn to live with it”



## SUPPORTING A PUPIL FOLLOWING A FAMILY BEREAVEMENT

Children and young people do suffer when someone they love dies, so the death of a member of a pupil's family can have a profound effect on their life in school. It is therefore so important that they receive appropriate support from teaching staff to enable them to cope within the school setting. However **teachers do not have to be "bereavement experts" to help grieving pupils** – you can do much by just being yourself and showing that you care. You can make a real difference by listening, trying to understand what it might be like to live in a world where someone you love is now missing, and by helping to find ways in which pupils can cope with their altered lives. (See section on *"Helping Children through Grief"*) You may find the following suggestions helpful when devising a plan to support a bereaved pupil in your care.

### Initial Action Plan

- Identify the member of staff who will be the contact point for the bereaved family.
- Acknowledge the death with the pupil and family by phone, card or visit – most pupils derive a huge sense of support and comfort from this act.
- Decide with the pupil/family how the information about the death is to be conveyed to the rest of the staff and other pupils. Some pupils like to be there when their classmates are told, (or even do it themselves), others prefer not to be. Others (particularly older pupils) may not want a general announcement to be made, but prefer to choose themselves who should know and tell them themselves. If appropriate, give the pupil the choice.
- Ensure regular contact is maintained with the pupil and family – this helps inform you about how they are coping, what their concerns are and what would be most helpful for the pupil if there are difficulties. Where possible involve the pupil in deciding how problems can be overcome – this helps them develop their coping strategies and learn about their network of support
- If the pupil is off school, ensure they do not feel forgotten – cards, messages or visits from staff and peers help to remind them that people care. These activities will also provide opportunities for the class to feel they are doing something positive and is an opportunity to discuss their own concerns and worries and think about ways to support their classmate on their return.
- If appropriate, arrange a meeting with the pupil (and family) before their return to school to address any concerns and to devise strategies with the pupil to help them cope once back in school. (See section on *"A bereaved pupil's return to school"*)
- Nominate a key member of staff (in consultation with the pupil if appropriate) who will offer ongoing support and monitoring of the situation as things change.
- Ensure all staff (including ancillary staff) are aware of the bereavement and the possible effects on the pupil, their behaviour and their learning, so that appropriate support can be offered.
- Consider the appropriateness of staff attending the funeral – consult with the family. Pupils often appreciate the presence of their teacher as an acknowledgement of the importance of what has happened in their lives.

### Ongoing Action Plan (see also section on *"Helping Children through Grief"*)

- If the pupil is having difficulty returning to school, you may be able to consider an individual reintegration package; short visits, working alone, attending favourite lessons, reduced timetable.
- Quietly check on a regular basis how things are going and if problems arise, ask the pupil what they think could be done to improve the situation.

*Continued overleaf*



- Help pupils to understand the mixture of feelings that make up grief are **normal**, (see section on “Children’s reactions to bereavement”), which, with support and strategies, can be managed.
- Consider “time out” card or similar way in which pupil can exit the classroom quickly if feeling emotionally vulnerable – make sure they know where to go and what support is available.
- Because concentration is often diminished following bereavement and pupils are often tired, disorganised and lack initiative, they may well need more of your help than usual. Monitor how things are going academically and socially, give praise for any achievements, and reassure pupil that things will improve in time. If necessary, organize ways to enable the pupil to catch up with work missed.
- Maintain normal rules and expectations of behaviour – but bear in mind the impact of bereavement on pupils and their families when considering sanctions. For example punishing a pupil for forgetting to bring the correct equipment into school in the aftermath of a death would not be appropriate but handing out a punishment for lashing out at a peer might be. You could explain that whilst you understand that emotions may be running high at this time, it is still not acceptable to hurt others.
- If the pupil thinks it would be helpful and friends agree, establish a peer support network – ensuring that those helping are given appropriate support themselves.
- Make a note of significant dates which might affect the pupil, e.g. date of death, birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries. Make sure other members of staff are aware of these and the possible reactions from the pupil. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge these potentially difficult times with the pupil – e.g. **“I know Christmas is coming up and it might feel a very different and difficult time for you all this year without your Dad – so don’t forget, if it helps to talk you can always come and see me”**.
- Consider possible reactions to certain class/assembly topics. Discuss how these difficulties might best be managed with the pupil e.g. if making Mothers/Fathers day cards do ask the pupil if they wish to be included in the activity too – very often the answer is yes as they still have a parent, just can no longer see them, but still want to remember them.
- Recognise a pupil’s own resources and help them identify and build on their strengths.
- Look out for any indication of isolation, bullying or difficulties in the playground – bereaved children are often seen as vulnerable and may become a target for others.
- Consider using books/activities to help pupils explore feelings and ideas about death as part of the normal school curriculum (see *book list and website addresses at end of pack*).
- Be alert to changes in behaviour – these may be an indication that the pupil is more affected by their bereavement than they are able or willing to say. Reactions may present themselves months or years after the event, and it may be difficult for staff and other pupils to relate behaviours to the bereavement.
- Notify examination boards of the impact of the bereavement if public exams are due.
- Follow up absences – absence could indicate bereavement – associated problems at home or school.
- At the end of the day, being yourself, listening, caring and keeping familiar routines and behaviour boundaries in place can do much to help a grieving pupil – they promote a sense of security and safety when other areas of their life may be in a state of chaos.

**Remember, there is no set pattern or time limit to grief – it is a lifelong process and different ages and new life events may re-awaken the sense of loss. The pupil may need to re-visit their bereavement many times – be prepared to share the journey.**



## HELPING A BEREAVED PUPIL RETURN TO SCHOOL

It is not unusual for bereaved pupils to take time off school during the early stages of their bereavement. For some, the need to be with their families will be strong, and indeed they may suffer from separation anxiety when the time comes for a return to school. For others the familiarity, stability and routines of school life may prompt an early return. The time away from school will vary from pupil to pupil but when they do return, they may have a number of concerns – you will only know what these are and how they might be resolved if you ask. Some of the more common concerns might be:

- **How will staff and peers react– who has been told, what do they know, what will be said, how much will I have to say to people?**

You can help by: meeting with the pupil to welcome them back, acknowledge the death and talk through their concerns. Saying something simple like **“I am sorry to hear that your dad died – sometimes it helps to talk about it and if so, Mrs Y will be there for you – will that be OK?”** is usually much appreciated by the pupil. If possible offer the pupil choices about how things should be handled in school and what support would be helpful. Let staff/classmates know how pupil wants to be received and supported.

- **Fear of sudden emotional outbursts – anger, distress, panic.**

You can help by: normalising grief reactions (See section on *Children’s reactions to bereavement*) and giving the pupil choices about what strategies will help them to cope in the classroom e.g. able to leave lessons without fuss – “exit card” system, where they can go, who they can talk to.

- **Fear of being behind with work and unable to catch up.**

You can help by: clarifying with other staff what is essential to accomplish and what can be left, and offering appropriate help to achieve what needs to be done

- **Inability to concentrate and feel motivated or sit still**

You can help by: Reassuring the pupil that this lack of motivation and concentration is normal and will pass. Offering shorter, more manageable tasks, giving encouragement for achievements and minimising difficulties often helps.

- **Family grief impacting on normal family functioning** – e.g. meals sporadic, routines disrupted, bedtimes chaotic, etc. which may mean that the pupil is inadequately prepared for school, does not have the necessary equipment, and may be tired or hungry.

You can help by: Checking out with the pupil where areas of difficulty lie and try and work out strategies with them and their family to help keep things on an even keel in school. Identify their strengths and help them build on them.

- **Unable to meet homework/project deadlines because of altered responsibilities within the family and home.**

You can help by: helping pupil work out and meet priorities. Be flexible where possible and offer additional support where needed.

- **Forthcoming examinations**

You can help by: Explaining the process of notifying examination boards and the possible outcomes.



## WHAT TO DO WHEN A PUPIL OR MEMBER OF STAFF DIES

When the death of a pupil or member of staff occurs within a school community there is often a profound sense of shock - even if the death is expected. For this reason it is important to have already thought through a plan of action as it is sometimes difficult to think clearly at a time of crisis. It is advisable that, with the consent of the family, accurate, factual information is shared with staff and pupils as soon as possible to avoid rumour or gossip circulating. You may find the following guidance helpful when considering how to respond to the death of a pupil or member of staff in your school community.

### Immediate Actions

- Identify the member of staff (usually the Headteacher) who will be the initial contact for the bereaved family. (This might change as time goes on)
- Initiate contact to offer the collective sympathy of the school and to ascertain details of what happened and what can be told to the rest of the school. Some families may not want all facts known, but it is important to point out that information gets around by other sources and can be more distressing in the long run if not accurate.
- Contact those staff and governors who need to be told immediately and then arrange a meeting to inform all other members of staff. Don't forget to let ancillary/administrative staff know what has happened and any plans.
- Consider who else might be available for staff/pupil support e.g. school nurse, counsellor, E.P.
- Be aware of the impact on some staff for whom the news may have special significance e.g. activating memories of own losses, close relationship with the pupil or member of staff.
- Ensure staff are aware of what support is available to them and where possible arrange for class cover if staff unable to undertake their normal duties.
- Identify who will liaise with LA/Governors/press/parents/agencies in the event of a major incident or death due to contagious illness e.g. meningitis (refer to LA - Emergency Planning Guidance)
- Agree what information will be given to the rest of the school, by whom and in what manner. In larger schools, it can sometimes help to write a short statement for staff to read out to their classes to ensure consistency.
- Where possible, with the family's consent, a letter should be sent home explaining what has happened, what the pupils have been told and what support is available in school for those who need it.
- Send/take flowers, cards on behalf of the school – this can be not only an expression of support for family but an acknowledgement of how much the person was valued.

### Breaking news of the death to pupils and making an action plan

- This is often best done as soon as possible in class or tutor groups where the teacher knows the pupils and can explain and follow up what happened in the most sensitive way. If appropriate, a whole school assembly can be held to demonstrate the sense of shared loss within the school community.
- What happened should be told simply and factually – don't stray into conjecture. You should use clear, correct language and terminology, avoiding euphemisms such as "lost" and "passed away" which might confuse younger children.

***e.g. "I have got something very sad to tell you. You all know that (pupil) has been ill with cancer for a long time and has not been well enough to come to school much lately. As you know sometimes people with cancer do not get better, and sadly yesterday (pupil) died. He was at home with his parents. We have no more details at the moment but if we learn anymore that we think it would be helpful for you to know then I will tell you".***

*Continued overleaf*



*Or e.g. "I have something very sad to tell you. You may have heard about the accident on the motorway yesterday. Well Mrs Y was involved in the crash and was taken to hospital. I am sorry to have to tell you that, although the doctors did all they could to help her, her injuries were so bad that she could not survive the accident and she died last night"*

- Time should be allowed for pupils to ask questions and express feelings. Reactions will vary – all should be acknowledged and pupils helped to understand grief is a normal response to loss
- It is helpful if you can have someone else in the room with you to support you and those pupils particularly affected by the news. Acknowledge how the news has affected you if you wish to.
- Initially it may be necessary to waive timetable expectations for those pupils badly affected by the news – time to be together as a group with support, talking, remembering, making cards, creating memory books or boxes which could be added to over the coming days, may be most helpful for some – others will want the routine of school to continue. If possible, offer choice.
- Be aware of the impact on key friendship groups – these may span different classes.
- Let pupils know what support (people/places) will be available and how to access them.
- Begin to explore what can be done to support each other/the family of the person who died.
- Some schools find it helps to create a "memory board" on which staff and pupils can post messages and memories of the person who died – set up in a quiet area where people can reflect and remember- can be quite healing. The memories can be collected later and put in a book for the family if appropriate – perhaps at an assembly or memorial event.
- Arrange for staff/pupils who wish to, to visit or send cards, flowers, drawings etc. to the bereaved family - this will send a message of support to the family and also help pupils to express their emotions and feel they are doing something positive.
- Consider who should go to the funeral and how this should be organised. Consult with the family. For those who cannot attend and would like to, is it possible to mark the occasion in school in some way – e.g. light a candle, listen to music, share memories, silent reflection etc.
- This is a difficult time for pupils and staff alike, so having given support to the pupils it is important that the staff should feel supported too. It is often helpful for staff to be offered the opportunity to meet up at the end of the day, debrief and give and receive support from each other – tea and cake always helps! If people feel nurtured themselves, they are more able to nurture others. (See section on "Looking After Yourself")

### Ongoing Actions

- Be prepared to go over the same information several times with pupils as bad news is sometimes hard to take in first time around. Ensure consistency of explanation among staff. Questions from pupils may continue long after the death occurred.
- Be aware of any changes in behaviour or attitude over time which may indicate that someone is more affected by the death than they may be able to say. Ask them what would help.
- Discuss with family/staff/pupils the development of a memorial if appropriate – this can be in the form of something practical like a bench or tree, or can take the form of an annual fundraising event, cup or trophy reflecting the pupil or staff member's particular interest.
- Use books/activities to help pupils explore feelings and ideas about death (see list of books/website addresses at end of pack).
- Consider the need for a whole school assembly/memorial service (See section on "Holding an Assembly/Memorial Service").
- Remember to mark the anniversary of the death in some way, if appropriate

**"A child can live through anything so long as he or she is told the truth and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering"**

Eda Le Shan

**GRIEF SUPPORT FOR THE YOUNG IN OXFORDSHIRE**

**Tel: 01865 744 768**

**[www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk)**



## HOLDING AN ASSEMBLY OR MEMORIAL SERVICE

Bringing a whole school or part of a school community together to remember someone who has died can often be a very helpful, healing activity. It can be an act of remembrance and/or celebration which affirms the life and contribution to the school of the person who died and is often most successful when it is a joint activity between staff and pupils. Sometimes it helps to hold an initial service to acknowledge what has happened and share feelings about the loss, and then later to organise a commemorative event to celebrate the life of the person who has died. It can also be an acknowledged time for any pupil to remember anyone they wish to who has died

### Who should attend ?

Basically anyone in the school community who wishes to, and, although they may not feel able to attend, many families appreciate being invited – or at least being informed that an event is taking place.

### Who should be involved ?

Very often the pupils themselves can come up with great ideas for celebrating or remembering the person who died – participating also gives them the feeling of doing something positive.

### What to do

It might be best to hold the event before a break so that people have time to compose themselves before continuing the school day. This also means the day might end on a more “normal” note. If held at the end of the day, make sure people have time to compose themselves before going home. Whenever it is held make sure people know what support arrangements are available if needed

Make sure you have a clear beginning, middle and end to the service and try and end on a positive note

You might wish to:

- Light a candle
- Incorporate the person’s favourite music/poetry/prose
- Ask the pupils to compose a piece of poetry or prose or music
- Make and display a collage of the person’s work/life in the school
- Make a memory book/box of all the things people want to remember
- Suggest the class create a “jar of memories”
- Create a tribute or friendship tree – draw the outline of a tree and then offer people “leaves” on which to write their memories to be attached to the branches.
- Plant a tree/bulbs/shrub at the end of the event
- Ask for suggestions about a lasting memorial (if appropriate)
- Suggest staff/ pupils organise a fundraising event in memory of the person who died

Let people know how long the memory book will remain open - not everyone will be able to express their feelings immediately following a death but should be given time to make their responses

People’s contributions can be displayed in school for a time and then offered to the family.

**“Weep if you must, parting is hell  
But life goes on, so sing as well”**

(Joyce Grenfell)



## SUPPORTING A PUPIL WITH A LIFE LIMITING ILLNESS

It can be very distressing to find that one of your pupils is suffering from a life limiting illness, and supporting them during the course of the illness can bring stresses and challenges for the whole school community. However, in our experience sharing this journey can also enrich the lives of many who come into contact with the child or young person and their family. If you are going on this journey the following suggestions might help you plan the route. (You can also contact SeeSaw for more advice and information about supporting children with a life limiting illness and their peers.)

- Many children with a life limiting illness want to continue to attend school for as long as possible. Among other things, this enables them to have some normality in their lives and ensures continuity of friendships. Continuing to take part in school activities gives a sense of achievement and puts the emphasis on living rather than dying and gives them back a sense of identity other than that of a patient.
- Nominate one person to take responsibility for having regular contact with the family. Through this person all staff can be made aware of changes in the pupil's health and can amend the system of support in place at school as needed.
- Even when pupils are very ill and are unable to attend school they often want to remain part of school life. Staff and classmates can keep in touch by sending cards, messages, photos etc. and make visits if appropriate. This contact sends a powerful message of support to the whole family. What would be helpful and acceptable to the family can be checked out through the on going contact.
- If the child is receiving treatment from a local hospice or hospital there is often a nurse or social worker whose job includes visiting schools to explain to pupils about the illness and the effects of the treatment involved. With the agreement of the family, contact could be made with this person for advice and support for staff and pupils alike.
- Parents of other pupils may have concerns about their own child being made anxious about information given about their seriously ill classmate. With the agreement of the family, it might help to pass on what information is being given in the classroom and what measures are in place to support all pupils during this time.
- There is likely to come a time when the pupil's health deteriorates significantly and it may become necessary to keep the other pupils informed of what is happening to avoid rumours circulating about either the illness or subsequent death. This should be done with the knowledge and permission of the family and it may be helpful to consider ways in which this could be done before it happens. Remember, children deal better with difficult situations when given honest explanations in a language they can understand -

**So consider:** (and see section on "What to do when a pupil or member of staff dies")

- Who will break the news – class teacher or Head?
- How far through the school does the news have to spread?
- What support system will be in place for those pupils or staff who are most affected by the news – do they need someone to talk to/quiet space to go

*Continued overleaf*



- Should a letter go home to parents telling them what information has been given, what support is available in school for pupils and what reactions parents might expect from their child so that they are prepared and can offer support at home?
- How should the school respond when the death occurs – should cards/flowers be sent, visits made? By whom? Staff, pupils, governors?
- In the event of a death, with the family's agreement, how many parents should receive a letter giving information about what has happened and what action the school has taken to support the pupils? Class/whole school?
- If pupils are to attend the funeral, who will prepare them for the event? What do they need to know about what will happen? What support will there be for them and for those pupils who remain at school?
- What will happen to the child's desk/chair/peg – let class have input
- Should the school hold it's own special memorial service? If so who should be involved and what form should the service take – favourite stories, poems, music, display of work, remembrance table, friendship tree? Talk it over with the class and family.
- Is a lasting memorial appropriate? If so, what? Tree, trophy, book, fundraising event?
- Who should be involved with decision – family/pupils?

#### **Children, like adults, will grieve in their own ways and very often what they need is:**

- To have the bereavement acknowledged and have the opportunity to talk about the person who has died if they wish.
- To understand that what they are feeling is normal, and whatever they are feeling is accepted by those around them.
- To know that there is someone in school who will support them if they get upset.
- To have their questions answered honestly, in a way that they can understand. With medical issues, it might be helpful if the School Health Nurse is available to brief staff/answer questions.

Be prepared for pupils to say or do the unexpected when given bad news – they could show a range of grief reactions, or no immediate reaction at all – watch out for emotions/behaviours to emerge as time goes on. Questions may arise long after the death occurred.

Remember, if a pupil asks you a question to which you are not sure how to respond, you can always ask them what they think about the issue. ***“What do you think?”*** can often give the pupil the opportunity to work the answer out for themselves or clarify their thinking – and a ***“That's a really interesting question, let me think about that and get back to you”*** gives you chance to clarify yours! And as always, if you don't have the answer, don't be afraid to say you don't know, but will try and find someone who does!

**Make sure you have support for yourself – this is an emotional time which can be draining and exhausting – you must find ways to take care of yourself!**

*(see section on “ Looking After Yourself”)*



## SUPPORTING A PUPIL BEREAVED BY SUICIDE

Death by suicide is a traumatic and sometimes violent event which often results in complicated bereavement issues. Families are often left with agonising questions, and in many cases have to learn to live without answers. Suicide quickly becomes a very public event and schools can be a hotbed of rumour and speculation, so it is important that staff have thought through an appropriate response if informed of such a death. We have therefore put together the following guidelines which you might find helpful when formulating your school response.

- Acknowledge the death with parent/carer and pupil - just as you would any other death (see section on "Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement")
- Establish what the children in the family know.
- Establish what the parent/carer (and pupil) wants the rest of the staff and the other pupils to know – pointing out that rumours are bound to circulate (or have already) and it might be more helpful to the family and pupil if simple, accurate information is given by the school.
- If there are discrepancies between what the family believe their children know and what is being said in the class or playground, it is important to relay this information back to the family so that they can reassess the information they pass to their children.
- Arrange a staff meeting and let staff know what information is to be given to which groups
- If the parent and pupil are agreeable for the information of the suicide to be shared, and this may only be necessary if the information is already in the public domain and other pupils are asking questions, it might be helpful for younger children to say something like **"Many of you will already know that X has died. People usually die when they are very old, they have an illness or they have an accident but sometimes people decide they do not want to live any longer and hurt themselves so badly that they die. This is called suicide and that is what happened to X. We do not know why X did not want to live any longer, but we do know that this is an extremely sad time for (pupil) and his family and what is important for us to do now is to think of ways we can help (pupil)"** Whilst you can talk in general terms about why people chose to die, it is best not to enter into speculation about this particular death. You might also want to reassure pupils that this is a rare occurrence so they need not fear for members of their own families.
- When details of the death are given to pupils, it is sometimes helpful to send a letter home explaining what the children have been told, and giving details of where parents can get information about how they can support their children should this be necessary. Make sure the family are aware of this action and of the contents of the letter.
- If the parent or pupil does **not** want the details of the death disclosed, but agreeable for the class to know that the death has happened, you may want to say something along the lines of **"I have something very sad to tell you. (Pupil's) Daddy died last night. We do know that this is an extremely sad time for (pupil) and his family and what is important for us to do now is to think of ways we can help (pupil)"**.
- Keep in regular contact with the family/pupil so that any changes in support needs can be accommodated.
- Bear in mind the fact that the inquest may take place some time after the event and give rise to renewed anxiety and distress for pupil and family alike.

### Some important points to bear in mind when supporting a pupil bereaved by suicide

- It is important to acknowledge the death with the pupil and family and offer support in the same way as you would any other death – if teachers can't talk about what happened with the pupil and their family, this may reinforce feelings of isolation, guilt and shame.
- A family suicide may be felt by a child or young person as the ultimate rejection, and can result in a lowering of self esteem. Staff can help pupils feel better about themselves by recognising the smallest achievements, emphasising any positives and identifying and encouraging personal strengths.

Continued overleaf



- It is important to reassure pupils that nothing they said or did was the cause of the death – the person who died made their own decision, for whatever reasons, to take their own life. Often there is no single reason why someone decides to end their life, it may be a culmination of events and issues over time.
- The intense feelings which often result from a death by suicide may result in the pupil exhibiting challenging behaviour in school. Acknowledge these feelings with the pupil and together try and work out ways of managing the behaviour in school.
- Children who witnessed any part of the suicide may experience flashbacks or have intrusive memories of the event. This will have a major impact on their ability to concentrate and may affect their day to day functioning at home and at school. Watch and listen - and if concerned, discuss with the parent and refer the pupil on as they may require specialist help.
- This may be a particularly difficult subject for some staff – check out who is the most appropriate person to offer support to the pupil and their family.

*(If you wish to read more widely around the issues of suicide, you may find the information contained on the Winston's Wish website helpful – [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk))*

**No matter how risky and uncomfortable it feels to us, almost any attempt to communicate and involve the young person is better than exclusion and silence**



## SUPPORTING A BEREAVED CHILD IN NURSERY SCHOOL

Very young children in a nursery setting who have experienced the death of a parent or someone constant in their lives **will** grieve for the loss of that person – but the grief may not be expressed in ways we might expect. The pre school years are a time of huge developmental changes and as young children mature at different rates, their understanding and responses to death are likely to be based as much on their experiences of life as on their chronological age. You know the children in your care so will know how the following guidelines best relate to them (See also section on “Children’s understanding of death”)

### Children under 2 years

- Babies and very young children do not understand the concept of death
- However, they do respond to the loss of someone significant in their lives with whom they have formed an attachment
- This response may take the form of eating or sleeping disorders, crying, or emotional withdrawal. They may also search for the person who has died.
- Their responses will also be determined by the emotional state of other adults around them – if others are upset or detached then this will impact on the behaviour of the baby or young child.

### Children aged 2 – 5 years

- Much of the above may also apply to this age group
- Children in this age group often think that death is reversible and that people who have died can come back.
- They are concrete in their thinking so are easily confused by such terms as “losing Daddy” or “Grandma fell into a long sleep” – this may make them worry about being lost (and not found) or fear going to sleep – it is important to use the correct terminology “Daddy has died”
- They often repeat questions about the death in an attempt to make sense of the “story”
- They may temporarily lose skills previously mastered – e.g. toilet training
- They may be upset, withdrawn, angry, tired, grumpy, confused – but for short periods only. Young children are often said to “jump in and out of the puddles of grief” – before going back to playing and having fun.

### How you can help

- Staff can do much simply by being their usual, caring selves and **keeping nursery life as normal as possible**. Consistency and normality provide a sense of safety and security for bereaved children when much of their lives outside the nursery may be in turmoil.
- Liaise with the family to ensure consistency of language about the death.
- Be tolerant of any regressive behaviours – giving encouragement to regain skills.
- Keep in contact with parents – if you know what is going on at home you will be better placed to offer appropriate support at the nursery. Be supportive of the bereaved adults in the child’s life.
- Answer children’s questions simply and honestly – let parents know if you have any concerns about what they are saying or believing. Be patient in repeating your responses!
- Let children talk about what has happened if they wish to – it is likely to be a short conversation before they go off to resume playing! You can help them by encouraging them if they want to talk about little things they remember about the person who died.
- Playing, drawing and talking about what happened and exploring any worries or feelings will help children begin to integrate their loss into their lives – but this should happen as and when the children feel ready to do it. Stories about death can sometimes help children’s understanding.
- Look after yourself – caring for a bereaved child can be very stressful and often the close relationship which exists between parents and nursery staff can mean that the death of a parent can have a significant impact on you too (see section on “Looking after yourself”).

**“The loss of a parent to death and its consequences in the home and in the family change the very core of the child’s existence”** (Worden, 1996)



## SUPPORTING BEREAVED PUPILS IN BOARDING SCHOOL

No where else in the education system is the phrase “in loco parentis” more applicable than in boarding schools. As a result, this “second family” aspect means that when tragedy strikes, the emotional impact on staff and pupils is intensified and has implications for the level of support needed by individuals

### Breaking the news of a family death to a pupil

- This task should be undertaken by someone who is known and trusted by the pupil and who can maintain on-going contact.
- This person should also have some knowledge about how children and young people grieve so that they can help the pupil understand and recognise the normality of their reactions – or lack of reactions. (See section “Childrens reactions to bereavement”).
- The news should be communicated in a safe, familiar place which is private and comfortable.
- The news should be delivered in a caring and sensitive manner.
- The language used should be clear (do not be afraid to use the words dead/died – euphemisms only serve to confuse especially younger children).
- Keep to the known facts and avoid straying into conjecture – you can always try and find out more information if the pupil asks – but it is important to be honest and stick to what you are sure of.
- Make sure you know what is going to happen to the pupil in the immediate future – are they going to go home/what are the plans – these will need to be conveyed to the pupil.
- Ensure that the pupil has understood what has been said and has time to ask questions and express emotions.
- Give the pupil choices about what support should be put in place (see section on “Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement”).
- If the pupil is at home when the death occurs, see section on “A bereaved pupils return to school”

### What to do when a pupil or member of staff dies

- Much of what is included in the previous sections on “What to do when a pupil or member of staff dies” and “Holding a memorial Service” is relevant for boarding schools too, but it would be worth remembering that both staff and pupil emotions may be intensified as there is no opportunity of sharing and discussing the implications of the loss outside the school community.
- Whilst it is important to allow the expression of feelings, it is also helpful to maintain normal routines and academic focus where possible to give everyone a sense of security and normality.

### On going considerations

- Ensure that all staff are aware of the bereavement and possible reactions from the pupil (see section on “Children’s reactions to bereavement”).
- Discuss with staff and pupil appropriate support strategies (see section on “Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement”).
- Ensure that the care staff in the boarding houses as well as teaching staff are aware of what to look out for and how to support a bereaved child in their care (see section on “Helping children through grief”).
- Watch, look and listen over time for any changes in behaviour that might indicate that the pupil is struggling to cope with their loss – talk through with them what might help.
- Ensure that support is available for those staff caring for a bereaved child and for those who are affected by the loss of a pupil or colleague. (Also see section on “Looking After Yourself”).

**“I did not know what to say to him, I felt awkward and blundering .....It’s such a secret place this land of tears”**

(The Little Prince)



## LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

**Bereavement is “not only painful to experience, but also painful to witness”**

(Bowlby 1980)

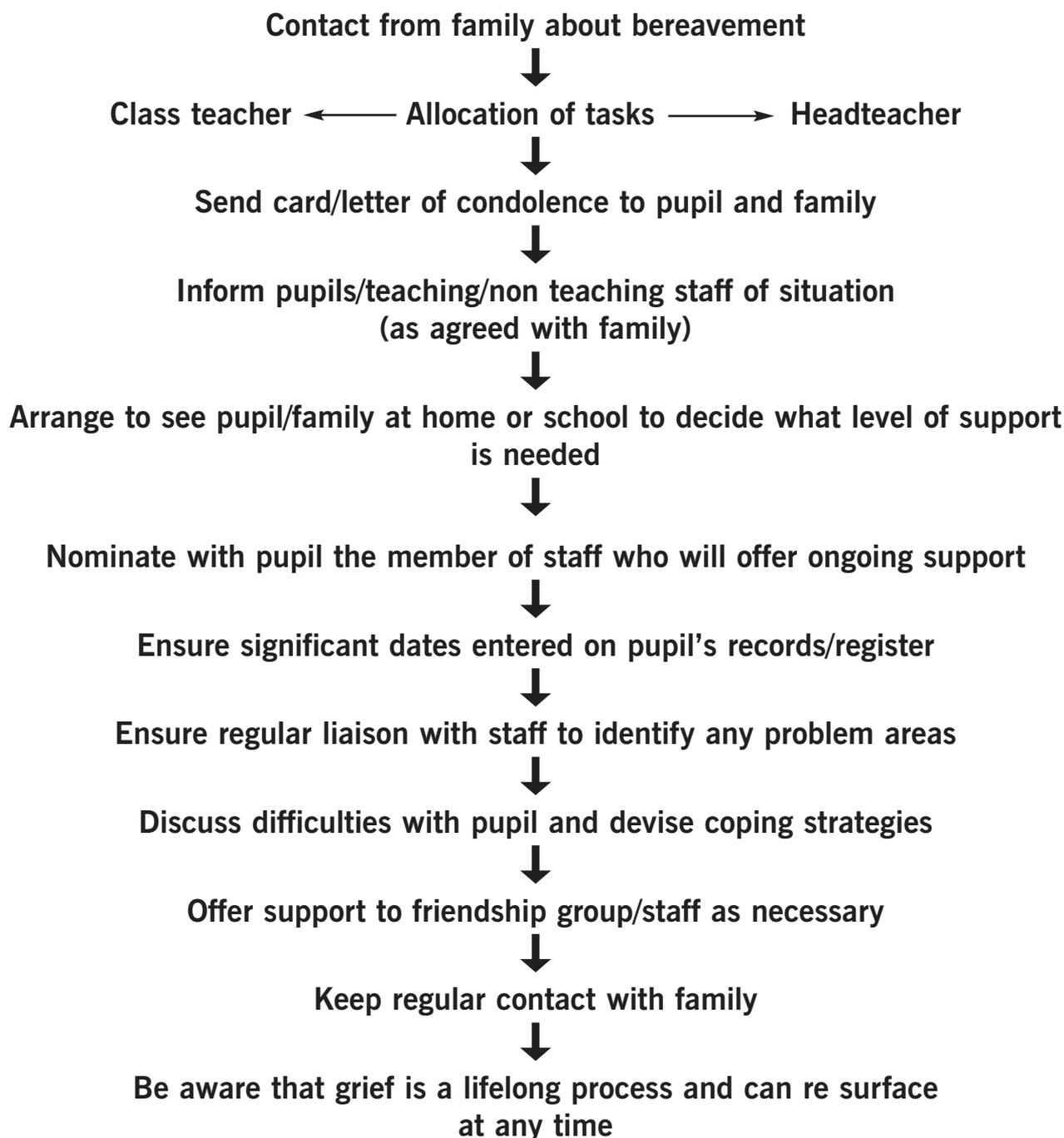
Supporting a bereaved child in your class can be very stressful. It is made more difficult because the support may have to continue over a long period of time and there is no “quick fix” solution to the child’s pain and distress. Sometimes the circumstances of the death may have resonances for you too, or you may have a personal connection to the person who has died. Whatever the situation, it may help to remember the following:

- Being alongside a child or young person’s pain and distress is very stressful, but you are not responsible for the child’s grief and you cannot carry it for them. What you can do is offer them support on their journey. It sometimes helps to remember that grief cannot be “sorted” but it can be supported, and your job is to find the words and the way to share the journey.
- Offering support is made easier if you understand how children and young people may react to bereavement and if you have strategies in your mind to help them cope in school. So read up about grief and bereavement or seek advice from other professionals. Being prepared gives you more confidence and reduces stress levels.
- Sometimes, witnessing another person’s grief can re-awaken losses from our own past. Be prepared to acknowledge your own grief should it re-emerge.
- It is both helpful and necessary when working with a bereaved pupil, or experiencing your own feelings of grief, to know where you can go for support for yourself – be this via your management structure or trusted colleagues. After all, you ensure pupils know where to go for support, so you need to know where yours will come from too! Knowing how to access your support network lightens the load and enables clearer thinking about ways forward.
- It is helpful to know your limitations, so do not offer more than you can deliver. Best to offer something small but be able to be constant in its delivery, than to go for the grand but unsustainable gestures! This will help keep things more manageable for you.
- At the end of a difficult day, take time for yourself – do something you enjoy and don’t feel guilty about it! You will be better able to face tomorrow if you are kind to yourself today.

**To be of help and support to a child you need to take care of yourself – this is not an indulgence  
– it is a necessity!**



## ACTION FLOWCHART





## FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING A SCHOOL BEREAVEMENT POLICY

It is often difficult to think clearly when a tragedy occurs, so formulating a school policy ahead of a bereavement occurring means you should be in a better position to cope when it happens. However, every school works differently and every bereavement situation is unique, so the following are guidelines only and the policy should be developed in a way that suits your school best.

### 1. Introduction

Should explain why it is important to devise a bereavement policy, and how this policy fits into the overall approach adopted by school towards the care of its staff and pupils. It should include the date when the policy came into operation, the review date and by whom it will be reviewed. You should also cross reference this policy with any other associated policies provided by the LA/ DfES, e.g. Critical Incident/School trips/Health and Safety. (See “Wise Before the Event” – Yule and Gold)

### 2. Aims of policy

This should identify who should benefit and by what means. So for example it might say something along the lines of:

“All staff and pupils faced with a bereavement will be provided with appropriate support. This will be by:

- offering opportunities to express feelings in a safe and supportive environment,
- the development of an action plan to support staff and pupils
- gaining access to specialist help if necessary”. (A note should be kept of any personnel or organisations which could help and any resources and information on grief, and trauma).

### 3. Who is involved and the roles adopted

This should include the name (or designation) and specific role of each member of the team. So your team might include:

- A Key Co-ordinator (usually the Headteacher) responsible for liaising with all parties
- A member of staff (?pastoral team) to coordinate support to pupils
- A media spokesperson
- School Health Nurse (if available) to offer support to staff and students
- A member of Governing Body to ensure staff are supported
- School secretary who has access to contact details, and can provide admin. support

### 4. Procedure

This should include steps to be taken and by whom from the moment staff are informed of a death. You could use the Action Flowchart to help you formulate the procedure.

### 5. Training

This might include a statement about providing opportunities for bereavement training

### 6. Evaluation, review and publication of Policy

Explanation of how the policy will be evaluated e.g. feedback from bereaved pupils, parents, and staff, how often and by whom the policy will be reviewed, and where the policy can be found.



## READING AND RESOURCES LIST

When compiling this information pack I found the following books helpful in determining the content and providing useful guidance. Also listed are useful websites. The Appendices contain 3 items of additional reading.

All books are available through normal book retail outlets except where specified. Alternatively, all copies may be borrowed from SeeSaw.

### Reading for Adults

**Good Grief – Exploring feelings, loss and death with U11's (separate book for over 11's)**

**Barbara Ward & Ass.**

Excellent school resource. Written for teachers – contains information, activities and ideas to help children explore issues around separation, loss and death. Photocopiable material.

**Helping Children Cope with Grief**

**Rosemary Wells**

Very helpful and easy to read. Practical advice and suggestions, real life examples of children's reactions to bereavement. Particularly suitable for adults working with children.

**Grief in Children – a handbook for adults**

**Atle Dyregov**

Useful and readable. Explains how children understand and react to death. Contains specific information about how to handle death in school and school's response to the needs of bereaved children.

**Death and Loss – compassionate approaches in the classroom**

**Oliver Leaman**

For teachers involved in the pastoral care of pupils. Includes ideas about curriculum content within PHSE.

**Giving Sorrow Words (Video and Book)**

**Killick & Lindeman**

Useful training package designed for school staff to help them deal with the effects of bereavement. Offers practical advice and demonstrates effective techniques for working with children and young people.

*(Available via [www.luckyduck.co.uk](http://www.luckyduck.co.uk))*

**Wise before the Event**

**William Yule & Anne Gold**

Describes some of the ways crises can affect schools, and suggests ways that schools can lessen the physical and emotional effects of disasters. Very readable and useful

**Saying Goodbye to Greg -**

**Christine Chapman**

**Understanding bereavement at Foundation, KS1 and KS2**

Very good bereavement training resource set in story form, using the "real life" situation of the death of a pupil in a primary school. The aim is to lead primary teachers through the bereavement process.

**The Social Curriculum – Death and Bereavement – Guidance for Schools Essex County Council**

Very useful and readable booklet detailing all aspects of managing death and bereavement in schools.

*(Available via Essex County Council Learning Services 01245 431021)*

**Loss Change and Grief – An Educational Perspective**

**Erica Brown**

Useful book exploring the experiences of bereavement within an educational setting including suggestions about supporting children with learning difficulties.

*Continued overleaf*



### Reading with Primary school children

#### **Badger's Parting Gifts**

**Susan Varley**

When badger dies his friends ease their sadness by remembering the special "gifts" he gave them

#### **I Miss You – a first look at death**

**Pat Thomas**

Simple factual and sensitive exploration of death which includes interactive questions

#### **Always and Forever**

**Alan Durant**

The animals talk and laugh about their memories of their friend Fox following his death.

#### **Beginnings and Endings with Lifetimes In Between**

**Mellonie and Ingpen**

Beginning with small creatures and ending with humans, the cycle of life and death is told factually.

#### **Scrumpy**

**Dale and Joos**

Tells the story of how a young boy reacts and copes when his much loved dog dies

#### **The Huge Bag of Worries**

**Virginia Ironside**

Jenny's worries build up and get out of control. She just can't get rid of them, until she meets an old lady who helps her sort them out. A lovely story with fun illustrations encourages children to talk about their worries.

#### **The Sad Book**

**Michael Rosen**

Book about Michael Rosen's sadness at losing his son – reaches out to adults and children alike

### Reading for Teenagers

#### **Vicky Angel**

**Jacqueline Wilson**

Even after she dies Vicky makes her presence felt through her close friend Jade.

#### **The Charlie Barber Treatment**

**Carole Lloyd**

When Simon's mum dies he begins to find life difficult. Through his friendship with Charlie he re-builds his life and relationships.

#### **When a friend dies**

**Marilyn E. Gootman**

Practical suggestions about what can help and full of quotes from bereaved adolescents

#### **When Parents Die**

**Rebecca Abrams**

Written for older teenagers/adults. Looks at issues surrounding bereavement. Autobiographical.

#### **Straight talk about death for teenagers**

**Earl A. Grollman**

Easy to read, concise and informative about what feelings and issues might arise for adolescents.

### Websites

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk) – information for schools, downloadable lesson plans, message board for young people, booklists, general information about grief and bereavement

[www.teachers.tv](http://www.teachers.tv) – School Matters – Coping with bereavement – video about two schools managing a death

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk) – information for schools, general information about grief and bereavement

[www.rd4u.org.uk](http://www.rd4u.org.uk) - designed by young people to help other young people through bereavement (Cruse)



## THE HEAVY STONE

My grief was a heavy stone,  
rough and sharp.  
Grasping to pick it up  
my hands were cut

Afraid to let go  
I carried it.  
While I had my grief  
you were not lost.

The rain of my tears  
smoothed it.  
The wind of my rage  
weathered it,  
making it round and small.

The cuts in my hands have healed.  
Now in my palm it rests,  
sometimes almost beautiful,  
sometimes almost you.

Averil Stedeford



*The following is an article written for the Compassionate Friends who have kindly allowed me to reproduce it here. Although written for families trying to cope with the death of a child, I think some of the concepts and explanations might be helpful for school staff who come into contact with either bereaved parents or young pupils, who are struggling to cope with a death in the family.*

## EXPLAINING DEATH TO A YOUNG CHILD

by Margaret Harvey.

Children often receive mixed messages about death. Their friend says “My granny’s gone to heaven”, they see dead leaves fall from the trees yet reappear afresh next spring, they watch the TV news and see bodies lying about the streets in war-torn areas of the world, a cartoon character jumps up again after being shot in the head. But what does any of this have to do with the cot death of a baby sister or the road accident that made a brother disappear?

It is confusing to be a small child at the best of times. In a family trying to cope with the death of a child, it must seem almost impossible – but we do need to think about the child’s understanding of what death is. This implies that we ourselves do understand something which none of us has yet directly experienced for ourselves, so how do we start?

- We must be honest. We must not say anything, which the child will later find to be a lie, which would destroy trust. This does not mean, however, that we should overwhelm children with too much information.
- We need to talk, as far as possible, at the child’s level of understanding, to use words they already know and concepts we think they understand.
- We must accept that they will need lots of repetition; this can be almost unbearably painful, but it is necessary. You may have said that death is for always, but that will not stop the child saying at bedtime, “Will Sally come home tomorrow?” You need to reply, “No, Sally’s dead, she can’t come home.” Young children are not always logical in our terms.
- We shouldn’t feel that we have to protect them from the emotions, or the grief – weeping together, letting them see that it’s OK to cry, will help them acknowledge their feelings. Children do know when adults are keeping secrets, shutting them out, and it makes them feel uneasy, afraid, uncertain – at a time when they desperately need to feel secure.
- We need to feel comfortable with what we say and also be able to say, “We don’t know.” It is difficult to make general statements because faith and religion are personal. Perhaps the key is to avoid pretence, not to use concepts of God and heaven as ‘facts’ if they have no meaning for you.
- Children will hear varied and contradictory stories about death. It is most helpful if you can accept whatever a child says, so that it can be talked about. It is reassuring for the child to hear “Yes, some people think that ...but we/I believe...”
- If we follow their lead and answer their questions it can help us avoid telling them too much at once.
- Using books can be a good way of saying things we find hard, and it is good for repetition of the key ideas. Books such as “Lifetimes” can give a broader focus: everything that lives has a beginning/birth and an end/death – that is their lifetime. The ‘gentle’ books (for example about the death of a pet) can be of great value because they make it possible for us to say “and that’s what happened to Sally, isn’t it? She has died too.”

So, with these general principles in mind, what should we tell children about death? Whatever the circumstances, the key fact is that the body has ceased to be of use, it is not alive, breathing or moving, it cannot be re-awakened. We can use images to help us explain this to a young child – it is like clothes no longer worn, the person has ceased to need them. It is important to establish this if the child is not to be frightened by the thought of the coffin, burial or cremation. If he thinks granny is in the coffin, he may be terrified that she is squashed, suffocating, that she will be hurt when she is cremated – children see things very literally, in terms of themselves.

*Continued overleaf*



If we say clearly that the body isn't the person any more, then we enter a more abstract and tenuous area – if granny still 'is', where is she? A very young child will probably ask this question and this is perhaps one area where we need to be guided by their needs, and their understanding. If you are a practising member of a religion and all the family worship together, then the beliefs about life after death are already part of the child's active vocabulary, even if their understanding is limited by age. But perhaps we should not underestimate children's awareness, even if it is not put into words.

There are some hard questions, which children often think about and which may become areas of great anxiety, even if they do not verbalise them. It may be helpful to think about some of them – to be prepared!

**What is it like to be dead?** It is true to say that no one knows exactly, because no one now alive has been dead! We do know that it does not hurt, that we don't feel cold or hungry (common child fears for the dead person) because 'we' are not there. You may believe, and share with your child, beliefs about heaven, God, re-incarnation, an afterlife – these are matters of personal faith.

**Are they asleep?** Children may wonder about this and it is important to be clear that death is not sleep. Sleep is rest, our bodies breath, our hearts beat, we have dreams – death is not like that, the body has completely stopped working and cannot start up again. This is important, or the child may be afraid of going to sleep himself. Other phrases best avoided include "we've lost granny" (where? how? when? – giving confusing messages about getting lost in the supermarket!) and someone "being taken" (by whom? why?) – creating fears of "me next", where death is akin to the abductor on the news.

**Why didn't the hospital/doctor make them better?** This is another area for reassurance. Usually people get a little bit ill and then they get better, just like a grazed knee when the skin 'mends'. Sometimes, usually when we are very old, our body gets so ill that it can't be made better, however hard the doctors try. Children whose brother or sister died in hospital need to be reassured that they were cared for, that no one 'let' them die.

**Was it my fault? Did I say something to make them die?** This too needs a clear response - it was not the child's fault, words don't kill people and death is never a punishment. Young children are not logical and often believe that they can 'wish' something to happen. This is an area hard for adults to understand, but one where unspoken fears can be real.

**It's not fair – why was it him/her?** On one level, there is no answer to this, and we all feel this about a young life cut short, but as adults perhaps we can more readily accept that life is not fair. We should guard against implanting fears of God 'choosing' or 'taking' people, of saying that God 'wanted him/her for an angel' – this may give a grieving sibling a picture of a powerful being 'snatching' people in death, even wondering if it will be their turn next. It may be more helpful to say that we don't always understand why one person gets ill and dies and another doesn't.

**Where have they gone? Where are they now?** It is hard to explain abstractions to very young children. There are no 'answers' and you must be true to your own thoughts and beliefs. Slightly older children may be helped an analogies – we cannot 'see' lots of things (dreams, love, being happy or angry) but they are real. Memories keep the dead person alive in a new way – in our hearts and thoughts and conversation. And nothing takes away the pain of missing someone we love – that is real.

These are only some of the questions that may be in the mind of a child struggling to understand death within a bereaved loving family. Perhaps the most important thing in the end is not the words we use but the hugs, the cuddles, the tears we shed together, the silences while we both remember and mourn .... and then our acceptance that a young child will need to run off and play with friends, to kick a football or go out to tea – for that is part of being a child.

I would like to end with a story about 7 year old Luke, a child in my school who clearly thought a lot about death. When we had read 'Badger's Parting Gifts' at Assembly, he stayed behind and said, "No one really knows what it is like to die, do they?" "No Luke, no one does"

"Mrs. Harvey, if you go there first, will you send me a postcard and tell me what it's like?"

I only wish I could Luke .....



## AN ADOLESCENT'S GRIEF AND MOURNING

“That’s when he should have come home – we always expected him to come in the door, and of course, he never did. We were afraid to talk about him together for quite a while, as though we’d upset one another and that would make everything even worse.

For a while I would pretend to myself that everything would be alright – that we didn’t really see much of Dad when he was alive – he was always so busy with work, so we wouldn’t really miss him that much. I used to pretend to myself that he was away on business. I kept going with that one for quite a while. Then I got scared stiff because of course I really knew he was gone, and that he wouldn’t be coming back, and that our lives were different now.

I was scared with all the responsibility that seemed to be on my shoulders now. I didn’t know how we’d be financially – if I’d be able to finish school, or I’d have to go out and get a job – but that turned out alright as he’d had a good insurance policy and we could manage. I was afraid of being different in any way – I’d always been a bit that way. I could remember the times I’d had a go at other kids – like Peter when his mum and dad split up – and I didn’t want them having a go at me. Being without Dad, fatherless, like an orphan or something, seemed really bad.

When I realised that that was alright, and maybe our lives would still go on in some sort of way as a family, I started to let myself think about him. I used to miss him a lot at nights – that was the time we spent together. I used to long for him to come back, make things alright again, just as they were before – but as time went on I was getting used to the way things were and accepting that he was gone.

I used to be in bed at nights thinking about him, about fathers, about what he’d meant to me – I remembered the times we used to spend together, the great times we had. He was a pretty good father I thought. A lot of things went through my mind about the past as well as about the future. I could talk to mum about some of them, but not many really as she seemed to need to lean on me. That was what the family expected – they kept saying it was good I was the man now – how lucky it was that I’d grown up enough to help her.

Sometimes it all seemed stuck inside. I felt really bad about the arguments I’d had with him – especially the bad blow up I’d had with him the week before he died. I used to wonder if that sort of strain had made his blood pressure worse or affected his heart. I tried asking my biology teacher about it. He was a great guy and seemed to sense that there was something more in what I was asking, and he asked me about my Dad. Well, I felt a fool at first – there I was crying and telling him all – but he didn’t seem to think there was anything wrong in that. He made me feel good about it – in fact I felt a lot better – like a burden had been lifted. I talked to him on and off after that and it was a great help. He made me feel that what I thought and felt about Dad was normal, and after a while I started to feel better. I still felt sad about Dad and we talked about him quite a lot at home. It was good to have a man like my teacher to lean on sometimes, but on the whole I felt I was getting over it all right and that there weren’t too many problems. Life was going on.”

Source unknown



## **Supporting bereaved pupils in school SeeSaw's Information Pack for Schools**

**Written by Christine Druce with grateful acknowledgement to those school staff and other professionals whose comments and suggestions helped shape the final document.**

**These sheets can be photocopied for use within your own setting.  
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