

# SeeSaw Schools Pack

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A guide to supporting  
pupils through  
bereavement  
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Grief support  
for children and  
young people  
in Oxfordshire

# SeeSaw Schools Pack

## A guide to supporting pupils through bereavement

SeeSaw is a local charity that offers support for children and young people in Oxfordshire who have been bereaved of a parent or sibling or someone significant in their lives.

The death of someone close can be a distressing and traumatic experience for children and young people. The effects can continue for months and even years after the event, as children may revisit their grief at different stages in their development. With the right help and support, most children and young people will not need professional help: what they do need is the understanding and care of familiar and trusted adults. Schools are well placed to give such support, providing security and routine when everything else may be in a state of chaos. The understanding of school staff and friends can be an invaluable source of support and comfort.

This information pack is designed as a resource to support school staff to feel more confident and equipped when supporting pupils through bereavement. It contains information on how children and young people grieve and checklists of things to remember when responding to a bereavement or providing support to a bereaved pupil.

We hope this pack will help you feel better prepared for, informed about and supported in helping bereaved pupils at your school. In addition to this pack, SeeSaw offers the following service to all Oxfordshire schools:

- telephone consultations about any aspect of supporting bereaved pupils at school
- visits to schools to discuss ways to support individual pupils who have been bereaved
- personal support and guidance for staff working with bereaved pupils
- staff training sessions around aspects of grief and bereavement

If you would like any further advice and support, please contact us on 01865 744768 or [schools@seesaw.org.uk](mailto:schools@seesaw.org.uk)

- All our services to bereaved children and their families and to any school or professional in the county of Oxfordshire are offered free of charge. Although we receive some funding from charitable trusts and grants we rely hugely on the support of our local community to help continue to fund the services we offer. **If you could help us in our fundraising efforts by considering SeeSaw as a beneficiary from a future fundraising event in your school, we would be very grateful.**

“ SeeSaw helped me to understand; made me feel I had somewhere to turn to for help; helped me realise what to expect; reassured me that I did have the skills to deal with the situation. ”

TEACHER



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# 1 How children and young people grieve

Children and young people grieve differently to adults and so will need a different type of support. The impact of a death will depend on a number of factors including an individual's personality, their relationship with the person who died, their family's culture and beliefs and the support available to them. Perhaps most importantly, the way in which children and young people understand and react after a death will be determined by their age and stage of development. So it is helpful to have some understanding of how children may grieve at different stages of their development. (Note the following are guidelines only and children don't move abruptly from one stage of development to the next so characteristics from each stage may overlap.)

## Babies and toddlers

Babies and toddlers don't understand what death or dying means but they will have a sense that someone they love is missing from their lives. Their response will be more about the loss of the person rather than their death. Children of this age will be sensitive to the emotional atmosphere around them: they may become clingy, cry a lot and have difficulties with sleeping and feeding. They will benefit from maintained routines and as much consistent care as possible.

## Pre-school children

Young children do not understand the finality of death so often think that the person will come back or can be visited. Children of this age may show signs of anger or sadness, but only for short periods, and they might regress in language and behaviour for a period of time. Without the understanding or language to express their loss, young children may use play to act out their understanding of what happened.

One of the most difficult aspects of children's grief at this age is that they may ask the same questions over and over again as they try and make sense of the 'story'. Children may need repeated explanations to develop their understanding and it's important that everybody uses the same language to avoid confusion. Like younger children, pre-school children will have a strong need for routine, structure, affection and reassurance to feel safe.

## Primary school children

Primary school children begin to understand that death means they won't see someone again. They also realise that death happens to everyone – including themselves – and this can lead to increased anxiety for their own health and those closest to them. Children of this age are curious about death and may need to go over facts again and again.

At this age children will have strong feelings of loss but may struggle to express them in words. They may show their grief through their behaviour – anything from withdrawal to anger and aggression. They can have a real sense of feeling 'different' from their friends and this can lead to them feeling quite isolated.

Primary school children may need help to express their feelings. They will continue to have a strong need for routine, structure, boundaries and reassurance in order to feel safe in a world which has suddenly become unsafe and scary. It's important to help children at this age to understand that when someone dies the body stops working and won't feel pain, get hungry or cold. Children of this age are prone to 'magical thinking' (believing that something that they said or did caused the person to die) and so they may also need reassurance that the death wasn't their fault.



### **Secondary school children**

Older children have a more adult understanding of death. They know that death is final and irreversible and are more aware of the future impact of their loss. Due to the developmental changes taking place at this time their reactions to death are likely to be extremely intense and they can easily become overwhelmed by their emotions.

Adolescents may have the appropriate language to identify feelings but may be reluctant to talk. At this age young people dislike appearing different from their peers and so may deny feelings and reject offers of support. They may act recklessly in defiance of death and question or reject beliefs, values and religion. Older children benefit from a willingness to listen and help to understand that their feelings are normal. At this age they will need to be given choices about what sort of support they need.

Remember there is no set pattern or time limit to grief – it is a lifelong process and a different stage of development and new life events may reawaken the sense of loss. Children may need to revisit their bereavement many times over the course of their development.



# 2 Tips for supporting bereaved pupils

When someone they love dies, the impact of the death for children and young people can be overwhelming and have a profound effect on their lives at home and in school. So it's important that they receive appropriate support from teaching staff to help them cope in the school setting. As teachers you do not have to be 'bereavement experts' to help grieving pupils – you can help by just being yourself, showing that you care and supporting your pupils to cope with changes in their lives. You may find the following tips useful when you are supporting a bereaved child or young person to cope with life at school after a bereavement.

## **Maintain normality**

When life has been turned upside down at home, the familiarity and routine of school life can provide a sense of security and normality. School can often provide a protective environment away from the overwhelming emotions experienced in a grieving family. Providing normality with caring and compassion is key.

## **Give time to listen**

Grieving children often need to talk about their loss. Trusted adults at school may offer a safe place to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Giving a few minutes in your busy day just to listen can make a real difference in the life of a grieving child.

## **Encourage the expression of feelings**

Bereaved children and young people will often need reassurance that what they are feeling is normal. Help them to understand that grief encompasses lots of different feelings, that everyone's experience of grief will be different, and that whatever they feel is ok.

## **Don't make assumptions**

Every child and young person grieves differently so try to avoid making assumptions about how a child or young person may be coping. It's important to remember that every experience is individual and that how a young person appears on the outside may well hide what they are dealing with and how they are feeling on the inside.

## **Respect individual and family beliefs**

Always try to understand the meaning and experience of the death for the individual child or young person within their particular family context.

It is important to take into account and respect individual and family religious (and non-religious) beliefs, rituals and practices around death. You don't need expert knowledge but talking to the family and young person will help you to avoid making inaccurate assumptions. Remember that even within cultures beliefs and traditions will vary and, for young people in particular, beliefs may be moderated by living in a Western culture.

## **Give choices**

Present some options for support. Choice helps young people to feel in control of what support they need and how and by whom it should be delivered. Their needs will change over time and should be checked at regular intervals.

## **Don't set time limits**

There is no timetable for grief. Grief reactions may not show themselves immediately – it may be months or even years after the event and grief may be revisited at significant times and at different stages of development. Continue to think ahead about subjects in the curriculum or events at home or at school that could trigger a young person's grief.



### **Be aware**

Look out for any changes in behaviour that might indicate a pupil is struggling. Explore reasons for the change, recognising that they may not be caused by the death. If necessary, discuss with the pupil who might need to know what is going on and whether they might benefit from some additional support.

### **Encourage guilt-free fun**

Remind bereaved children and young people that having fun does not mean they will forget the person who died; they need to be reminded that living is important too.

### **Be prepared**

By reading this information pack and learning about how children and young people grieve you will be well prepared to provide appropriate ongoing support. Find out if your school has a bereavement policy – read it and keep a copy. (See Sheet 18 ‘Framework for developing a school bereavement policy’.)



# 3 Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement

(For summary, see Sheet 4 'Flowchart of actions following a family bereavement'.)

## On first hearing the news

- 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 – Our experience at SeeSaw has shown us that most pupils derive a huge sense of support and comfort from this act.
- Discuss with the pupil/family exactly what details about the death they want to be shared and who they want the information shared with.
- 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 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.
- If the pupil is off school, ensure they don't 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.
- 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.
- 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 support and additional 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.

## On the pupil's return to school

It is not unusual for bereaved pupils to take time off school during the early stages of their bereavement. The time away from school will vary from pupil to pupil. For some, the need to be with their families will be strong while for others the familiarity, stability and routines of school life may prompt an early return. Bereaved young people will have anxieties about returning to school but there are a number of key steps that may help:

- Meet 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 the pupil wants to be received and supported.
- Consider a 'time out' card or similar way for the pupil to leave the classroom quickly if feeling emotionally vulnerable or overwhelmed. Ensure they know where to go and what support is available.



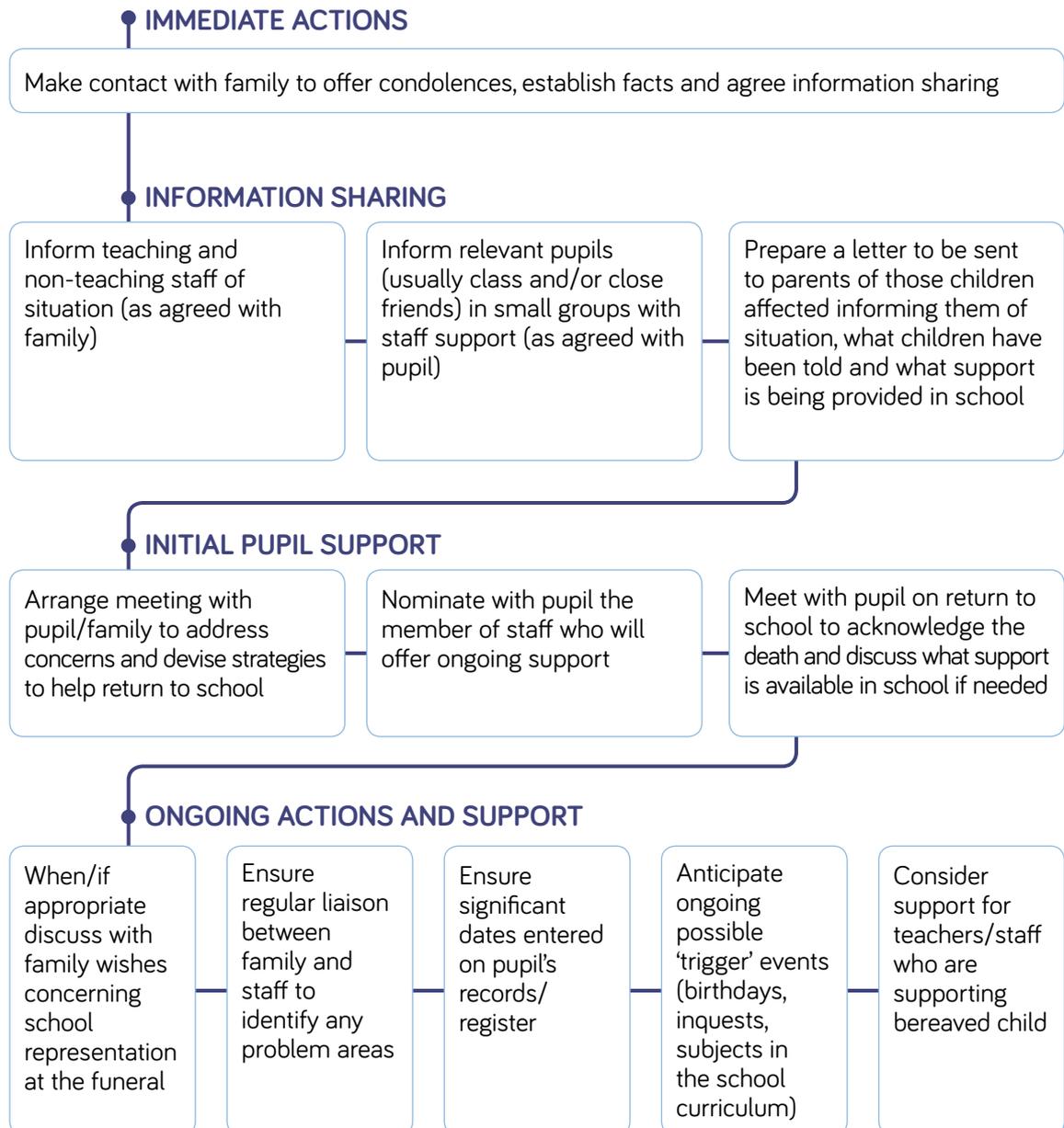
- Concentration is often affected following bereavement and pupils can be tired and disorganised. Because of this they may well need more of your help than usual. Monitor how things are going academically and socially, give praise for any achievements, and reassure the pupil that things will improve in time. If necessary, organise ways to enable them to catch up with work.
- 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 after a death would not be appropriate but handing out a punishment for lashing out at a peer might be.
- Be aware that grief reactions will come and go over a long period of time and sudden triggers can make young people upset, seemingly out of the blue.
- Help pupils to understand that the mixture of feelings that make up grief is normal, and can be managed with support and strategies. (See Sheet 1 'How children and young people grieve'.)
- 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.
- Consider possible reactions to certain topics in the curriculum. Always give warning and discuss with the pupil beforehand how these difficulties might best be managed, considering alternative options. (See Sheet 13 'Death and dying in the school curriculum'.)
- Look out for any indications of isolation, bullying or difficulties outside the classroom – bereaved children are often seen as vulnerable and may become a target for others.
- 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 – they could indicate bereavement-associated problems at home or school.
- Consider using books/activities to help pupils explore feelings and ideas about death as part of the normal school curriculum. (See Sheet 19 'Resources'.)
- Recognise a pupil's own resources and help them identify and build on their strengths.

### Ongoing actions

- Make a note of significant dates that 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 this year without your dad – so don't forget, if it helps to talk you can always come and see me."



# 4 Flowchart of actions following a family bereavement





# 5 Supporting a pupil bereaved by suicide

Death by suicide is a traumatic event that often results in complicated bereavement issues. Families are often left with difficult questions, and often have to learn to live without answers. Suicide can become a very public event, so it is important that staff have thought through an appropriate response if informed of such a death.

We have put together the following guidelines that you might find helpful:

- Acknowledge the death with the parent and pupil – just as you would any other death. (See Sheet 3 ‘Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement’.)
- Establish what the children in the family know and what the parent (and pupil) wants the rest of the staff and the other pupils to know. Rumours may already be circulating and it might be helpful to the family and pupil if the school gives simple, accurate information.
- If there are discrepancies between what the family believe their children know and what is being said in school, it’s important to relay this information back to the family.
- Arrange a staff meeting and let staff know what information is to be given to which groups.
- If the parent and pupil agree to share information about the suicide – and this may only be necessary if the information is already public – 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 don’t 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 don’t know why X didn’t want to live any longer, but we do know that this is an extremely sad time for (pupil) and their family and what is important for us to do now is to think of ways we can help (pupil).”
- While you can talk in general terms about why people choose to die, it’s best not to enter into speculation about this particular death.
- When details of the death are given to pupils, it’s 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 doesn’t want the details of the death disclosed, but agree to let the class 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) dad died last night. We know that this is an extremely sad time for (pupil) and their family. 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 sometime 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 – avoiding talking 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.
- It is important to reassure pupils that nothing they said or did was the cause of the death. 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 that often result from a death by suicide may result in the pupil exhibiting challenging behaviour. 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 can 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.



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

When the death of a pupil or member of staff occurs in 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. (For summary see Sheet 7 'Flowchart of actions following the death of a pupil or member of staff'.) If you need any further advice or support, please contact SeeSaw.

## Immediate actions

- Identify the member of staff (usually the head teacher) who will be the initial contact for the bereaved family. (This might change as time goes on).
- Make contact to offer the collective sympathy of the school and to find out details of what happened and what can be told to the rest of the school. Some families may not want all the 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 arrange a meeting to inform all other members of staff. Don't forget to let support/administrative staff know what has happened.
- Consider who else might be available for staff/pupil support, e.g. school nurse, counsellor, educational psychologist.
- Be aware of the impact on some staff for whom the news may have special significance, e.g. activating memories of their 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 are unable to carry out their normal duties.

- Identify who will liaise with local authority (LA)/governors/press/parents/agencies in the event of a major incident or death due to contagious illness, e.g. meningitis.
- Refer to LA – Critical Incident Management Plan (<http://schools.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/schools/files/folders/folders/documents/healthandsafety/Critical%20Incident%20Management%20Plan.pdf>).
- Agree what information will be given to the rest of the school, by whom and how. 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. Consider including with the letter guidelines for parents on supporting bereaved children. (See Sheets 16 and 17 'Advice for parents and carers'.)
- Send/take flowers, cards on behalf of the school – this can be not only an expression of support for the family but also 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 speculation. You should use clear, correct language and terminology, avoiding euphemisms such as 'lost' and 'passed away' that might confuse younger children.



E.g. “I have got something very sad to tell you. You all know that Mr X has been ill with cancer for some time and has not been well enough to be in school lately. As you know sometimes people with cancer don’t get better, and sadly yesterday Mr X died.”

E.g. “I have something very sad to tell you. You may have heard about the car accident yesterday. Well, X was injured in the accident and had to be taken to hospital. I’m sorry to have to tell you that, although the doctors did all they could to help her, her injuries were so bad that last night she sadly died. We have no more details at the moment but if we learn any more that we think it would be helpful for you to know then I will tell you.”

- Allow time for pupils to ask questions and express feelings. Reactions will vary – all should be acknowledged and pupils helped to understand that grief is a normal response to a death.
- It’s helpful if you can have someone else in the room with you to support you and those pupils particularly affected by the news.
- 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 close friends – these may span different classes and year groups.
- Let pupils know what support (people/places) will be available and how to access it.
- Some schools find creating 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’s important that the staff should feel supported too. It’s often helpful for staff to be offered the opportunity to meet up at the end of the day to debrief and give and receive support from each other.

### 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 something practical like a bench or tree, or 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 Sheet 19 ‘Resources’.)
- Consider the need for a whole school assembly/memorial event. (See Sheet 9 ‘Holding an assembly or memorial event’.)
- Remember to mark the anniversary of the death in some way, if appropriate.



# 7 Flowchart of actions following the death of a pupil or member of staff

## ● IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

Make contact with family to offer condolences, establish facts and agree information sharing

Make contact with others who may be able to provide additional support, e.g. SeeSaw, school nurse, educational psychologist, school counsellor, CAMHS in-reach worker

Consider what support will be made available to staff and pupils

## ● INFORMATION SHARING

Inform teaching and non-teaching staff of situation (as agreed with family)

Inform pupils in small groups with staff support (as agreed with family). Be aware of the impact of social media and the potential for rumours and misinformation

Prepare a letter to be sent to parents of those children affected informing them of the situation, what children have been told and what support is being provided in school

## ● IMMEDIATE SUPPORT

Allow time for staff and pupils to ask questions and express feelings. Older children are more likely to have immediate reactions and express their feelings more openly so may need more initial support

Set up quiet space for pupils to gather, reflect and remember

Let students know what support is available and how to access it

## ● ONGOING ACTIONS

When/if appropriate discuss with family wishes concerning school representation at the funeral

If appropriate arrange whole school assembly/memorial event with the input and involvement of other pupils

## ● ONGOING SUPPORT

Note – if there are other siblings in the school follow guidelines for pupil support on Sheet 3 ‘Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement’

Identify and monitor those pupils who may particularly be affected by the death, e.g. those who are previously bereaved or had a close relationship to the person who died

Anticipate ongoing possible ‘trigger’ events (birthdays, inquests, subjects in the school curriculum)

When it feels appropriate, maintain as much normality as possible in the school timetable and calendar while continuing to offer support for staff and pupils who are struggling



# 8 Sudden and unexpected death of a young person

## Rapid response meetings

Following every sudden and unexpected death of a young person under the age of 18 years the local Child Death Overview Panel will co-ordinate an immediate response called a Rapid Response Team meeting. The purpose of the RRT meeting is to gather information, consider support for the family, identify those at risk and aim to prevent future child deaths. The meeting is usually held within 72 hours of the death.

It's usual for a representative of the child's school (often the head teacher) to be invited to attend the meeting, often held at the John Radcliffe Hospital. He or she will be asked to provide information about the young person from a school perspective, to discuss school support needs or if appropriate to identify other pupils at the school who may be at risk. It's worth noting that school staff who attend the meeting will often have known the young person who died personally and may have to listen to detailed factual and clinical information about the death. Depending on the nature and circumstances of the death, it's advisable to send two members of staff to act as support and provide an opportunity to debrief with each other, as the information shared at the meeting will be confidential.

## Suspected suicide of a pupil

Managing the suspected suicide of a pupil at school can be extremely challenging. Senior staff will need to act quickly, co-ordinating the school's response while managing their own feelings on receiving such news. We recommend following the guidelines and flowchart for responding to the death of a pupil or member of staff included in this pack (see Sheets 6 and 7). In addition, the following points will need to be considered when the death is a suspected suicide:

- In many cases, the cause of death will be unclear. Before informing staff and pupils about the death it is particularly important to establish what facts are known and agree with the family what details can be shared. In many cases you will need to say that the cause of death is unknown at this

time. With the family's agreement it may be appropriate to say that it appears that the young person has died by suicide. Agree as a team the exact words that will be used to talk about the death, outlining only brief facts and immediate plans. Prepare a statement for staff to use to ensure consistency across the school.

- Do not share any information about the method used or speculate about any possible motives.
- Be prepared for stronger, more immediate emotional reactions from pupils and staff who may need more time to process hearing this news.
- Consider what support can be offered in school by pastoral staff, the school nurse and school counsellors. Some pupils may need to go home to get additional support from their families.
- When informing parents, explain what you are doing in school to support grieving pupils and make sure parents are aware of and have access to external support (e.g. GP, CAMHS SPA and SeeSaw).
- Identify any vulnerable pupils who may be particularly affected by the news considering those with mental health problems, previous bereavements or other significant personal problems, marginal groups or those who seem excessively upset by the news. Those who are affected by suicide may be more at risk themselves and may need additional support or referral to specialist services.
- When considering memorials for a pupil who has taken their own life care needs to be taken not to glamorise or sensationalise the death. We recommend holding an assembly or memorial event to remember the young person who died rather than a permanent memorial. Pupils should be discouraged from using memorial sites on social media, which can contain upsetting negative comments or romanticise suicide.
- If there are other siblings in the school, follow guidelines on Sheet 5 'Supporting a pupil bereaved by suicide'.



- The senior management team, and head teacher in particular, may need extra guidance and support when responding to the death of a pupil by suspected suicide. Additional support is available from CAMHS, Oxford Health and SeeSaw's schools' service.
- Additional information on responding to a suspected suicide is available from the Samaritans' Step by Step programme ([https://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/HWWNIM\\_Feb17\\_Final\\_web.pdf](https://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/HWWNIM_Feb17_Final_web.pdf)). Specialist advisers are also available to offer practical support and advice to schools (0808 168 2528).
- If you are concerned about the vulnerability of other pupils or the risk of contagion, extra information and support is available from Oxford Health and CAMHS. You can download a useful document *Building Suicide-Safer Schools: A guide for teachers and staff from Papyrus* (<https://www.papyrus-uk.org/repository/documents/editorfiles/toolkitfinal.pdf>). They also offer confidential help and advice to anyone who is worried about a young person (0800 068 41 41).



# 9 Holding an assembly or memorial event

Bringing a whole school or part of a school community together to remember someone who has died can often be a 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's a joint activity between staff and pupils. Sometimes it helps to hold an initial assembly to acknowledge what has happened and share feelings about the death, and then later organise a commemorative event to celebrate the life of the person who has died.

## Who should attend?

Basically, anyone in the school community who wishes to. 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 and can feel therapeutic.

## 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 can 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 event and try to end on a positive note.

## Ideas to include in an assembly or memorial ceremony:

- Light a candle
- Listen to some music – perhaps a piece that was significant to the person who died
- Alternatively pupils may want to compose their own music or poetry

- Make and display a memory board of the person's work and life in the school
- Make a memory book/box of all the things people want to remember
- 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

As well as an assembly or memorial event you may also want to consider other ways to commemorate the person who has died.

- Opening a memory book can allow members of the whole school community an immediate opportunity to express their feelings and record memories with words and photos. 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.
- Staff and/or pupils may want to organise a fundraising event in memory of the person who died.
- In the longer term it may feel appropriate to consider a more lasting memorial. Ask for suggestions from pupils and other members of the school community.



# 10 Supporting pupils with additional needs

Every bereaved child is entitled to have their grief acknowledged and have access to the support they need when someone is dying or has died. Attempts to protect vulnerable children and young people from difficult emotional experiences sometimes result in bereaved children with additional needs being overlooked or forgotten. In reality, these children may need a little extra help to understand what is happening or to express their thoughts and feelings. Your knowledge of each individual child will be invaluable in finding creative ways to help them understand, communicate and express their feelings when someone they care about is dying or has died.

## Communication

As with all children and young people, it is important to keep explanations clear, specific and factual. For children with additional needs you will need to ensure that explanations are tailored to match the child's cognitive and developmental level. (See Sheet 1 'How children and young people grieve'.)

It might also be helpful to consider:

- Who should be the key worker working with the child and family – inform parents who this person will be and maintain open communication with the family.
- Where is the child most receptive to new ideas – quiet room, pool, outside? Use this space for talking.
- As agreed with parents, what should be talked about? Ensure that you use the same language and ideas as the family to avoid confusing the child.
- How is new information normally given – signs, verbally, pictures? Use the same format to talk about illness and death and to identify changes. Stick to concrete language, avoiding euphemisms and abstract concepts.
- How is new information normally backed up? You will probably need to repeat information a number of times over a long period.

Build on information given – small bites of the whole given gradually will be easier to absorb.

Watch for reactions to show the child understands – modify and repeat as needed.

Follow the child's lead – if they indicate a need to talk or have feelings acknowledged, encourage as appropriate.

Watch for changes in behaviour to indicate the child is struggling more than they express verbally and offer support as needed.

Taking the opportunity to explain death in the course of everyday classroom life is helpful for all pupils. For example, if a classroom pet dies it's a great opportunity to show the children the difference between being alive and being dead. It is also an opportunity to give the pet a 'funeral' and involve the children in planning and talking about loss.

## Expressing emotions

Bereaved children and young people often struggle to understand and manage the powerful feelings they may experience when someone is dying or has died. Children and young people with additional needs may need some extra support in understanding that these feelings are normal and finding helpful ways to express them:

- Make a picture or storyboard to help the child tell their story.
- Social stories can help explain/understand what's happened and prepare for change.
- Use symbols to help prepare for and explain death and rituals.



- Make a 'comfort cushion' from scraps of fabric belonging to the person who has died for times when the child may feel sad. It's also possible to have a photograph of the person printed on the cushion.
- Identify a space for quiet time or when a child may need to calm down.
- Make plans for managing angry feelings – for example by punching a pillow or soft toy or allowing time out for brief physical exercise.

### Remembering

Here are a few ideas that can support children in remembering the person who died which you could adapt. You may need to liaise with the family for these.

- Laminated photos kept in the child's tray/locker.
- School memory box, with photos etc. that can be used to talk through the story from time to time.
- Using the person's aftershave or perfume sprayed on a scarf or hanky to bring comfort.
- A playlist of music that the dead person loved can be helpful.
- A particular item belonging to the person who has died that the child could bring to school.

### Supporting bereaved children and young people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Bereaved children and young people with ASD are particularly vulnerable to having their emotions and behaviours misunderstood. It may be assumed that they don't understand what has happened if they aren't showing expected signs of grief. Young people with ASD may also use language around death and dying or demonstrate behaviours that are felt to be inappropriate. As a result, children and young people with challenging behaviour can be left out of conversations or cultural and religious rituals for fear of upsetting other people.

When supporting a bereaved child or young person with ASD it may be useful to remember that the following are usual responses:

- They may struggle to fully understand the implications of the death and become easily confused about what death means.
- Grief reactions may be delayed for long periods of time.
- They may lack awareness of other people's feelings or fail to understand that their own responses will affect other people.
- They may demonstrate a very direct matter-of-fact attitude or constantly repeat questions.
- Existing behaviours may become worse after a bereavement – particularly fears and anxieties or resistance to change.
- They may be particularly sensitive and reactive to changes in routine.
- They may struggle to ask for or accept support from others.

Bereaved children and young people with ASD may benefit from the following:

- Keeping routines, expectations and boundaries as normal as possible.
- Keeping language simple, clear and appropriate to the level of understanding.
- Being prepared to answer repeated questions.
- Facilitating their inclusion and participation in cultural and religious rituals.
- Preparing them in advance for changes in routines at school.
- Helping them to recognise the emotions surrounding death and dying – both in themselves and in other people.
- Helping other children to understand why their reactions may not be typical of others.
- Using resources specifically designed for supporting bereaved children and young people with ASD.

### Resources

For specific resources for help in supporting children and young people with additional needs see Sheet 19 'Resources'.



# 11 Supporting a pupil whose parent or sibling is dying

When a pupil's family member is seriously ill and expected to die, it not only impacts the pupil and family but can also bring challenges to the rest of the school community. Young people may feel anxious and confused about the illness and worried about when their loved one is going to die. It can be difficult for school staff to find a balance between supporting the pupil, encouraging normality, and managing their own emotional response to the situation.

Unless the death is imminent, it's important to remember that a person who is seriously ill is still living and not dying. At this stage, pupils may need support as they adjust to the inevitable changes that are happening within their family and cope with the uncertainty and emotions that come when living with someone who is seriously ill.

## Communication is key

When a parent or sibling is seriously ill and going to die a school's role in communicating with the young person and with the family is critical. Families may attempt to protect children by avoiding talking openly about what is happening. Regardless of how well adults may hide their own feelings and anxieties, children and young people will be aware that something is wrong – often by noticing changes in someone's mood or physical appearance, or by overhearing conversations.

Once school has been made aware of a family member's diagnosis, encourage the family to keep school informed of significant changes. Give them a link person to contact in school so that they can communicate with school easily, either by phone or email. It is important to know how the illness is being talked about at home so that you use the same words when talking with the pupil in school.

Try to establish the pupil's understanding of what they believe is happening rather than what they have been told. If a pupil asks a difficult question that you are unsure how to answer, ask them what they think and try to find out what they are worried about. Remember to stay with the current facts rather than what you may fear as future outcomes.

Involve the pupil in deciding what support they need in school. If a pupil decides they don't want to talk about what is happening this should always be respected. Provide opportunities in school for a pupil to voice concerns, anxieties and worries if needed. It will be easier for them to do this with someone familiar, or someone they choose. They may wish to see the pastoral team or school nurse who can provide a safe place to talk.

School can play an important role in facilitating communication between the pupil and their family as an illness progresses. Find a way to communicate areas of misunderstanding or concern back to the family and encourage the pupil to talk to family members about their worries. Families can usually then explain and reassure as needed.

Unless the family member is dying soon, it's important to talk about the person as you would normally and include them in all communication with the school.



## Ongoing support

### Normality

The routines of school life can offer a place of escape as well as access to supportive friendship groups that provide normality and distraction from the emotional strains of what may be happening at home. Keeping things at school as normal as possible can help young people to feel safe and secure when dealing with all of the uncertainties of home life.

### Understanding

Living with a serious illness is exhausting for everyone concerned and school staff will need to understand the impact on children and young people. Tiredness, worry and frustration may lead to pupils seeming distracted or finding it difficult to concentrate. Others may seem on edge or withdrawn or become easily angry or upset.

Pupils may miss school or become disorganised and may need some practical help in providing items they need for the school day and extra-curricular activities. Pupils will benefit from extra praise for what they are continuing to achieve in school, having expectations and pressures lifted where possible, support for managing homework and special consideration when sitting exams.

## Additional support

For further advice and support for supporting pupils when a family member is dying, please contact SeeSaw.



# 12 Supporting bereaved children in nursery or boarding school

## 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. (See Sheet 1 ‘How children and young people grieve’.)

The pre-school years are a time of huge developmental changes. 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.

How you can help:

- Staff can help most 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's likely to be a short conversation before they go off to carry on playing. You can help 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 that exists between parents and nursery staff can mean that the death of a parent can have a significant impact on you too. (See Sheet 14 ‘Looking after yourself’.)

## Boarding school

Nowhere 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 may have implications for the level of support needed by individuals.

Breaking the news of a family death to a pupil:

- This task should be done by someone who is known and trusted by the pupil and who can maintain ongoing 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 Sheet 1 ‘How children and young people grieve’.)
- Give the pupil the news in a safe, familiar place that is private and comfortable. Give it with care and sensitivity.
- Use clear language: don't 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 speculation. You can always try and find out more information if the pupil asks – but it's important to be honest and stick to what you are sure of.



- Make sure you know what's going to happen to the pupil in the immediate future – are they going to go home/what are the plans – you will need to tell the pupil what is happening.
- Make sure that the pupil has understood what has been said, and has had time to ask questions and express emotions.
- Give the pupil choices about what support should be put in place. (See Sheet 3 'Supporting a pupil following a family bereavement'.)

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

Much of what is included in Sheet 6 'What to do when a pupil or member of staff dies' and Sheet 9 'Holding an assembly or memorial event' is relevant for boarding schools too. But it's worth remembering that both staff and pupil emotions may be intensified as there is no opportunity for sharing and discussing the implications of the death outside the school community.

While it's important to allow the expression of feelings, it's also helpful to maintain normal routines and academic focus where possible to give everyone a sense of security and normality.

#### Ongoing considerations

- Ensure that all staff are aware of the bereavement and possible reactions from the pupil.
- Discuss with staff and pupil appropriate support strategies.
- Ensure that the care staff in the boarding houses are aware of what to look out for and how to support a bereaved child in their care. (See Sheet 2 'Tips for supporting bereaved pupils'.)
- Watch 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. (See Sheet 14 'Looking after yourself'.)



# 13

## Death and dying in the school curriculum

Death and dying are an inevitable part of life. All children and young people will experience loss and many will experience the death of someone close to them. Schools are required to promote the emotional health and wellbeing of their pupils and so play an important role in teaching and supporting pupils to deal with a range of social and emotional issues.

Death is never an easy subject to talk about but schools have a variety of opportunities to start conversations. Opportunities for informal discussions about aspects of death and bereavement can occur during circle or tutor time as part of discussions of publicised incidents, when mourning small losses such as friends moving or lost possessions, using stories covering subjects of loss and death or simply by acknowledging the deaths of significant people on TV, in the media or those known to the school.

Children and young people need to learn that grief is normal. They can be helped to understand that everyone's experience of grief will be different, that there is no right or wrong way to feel and that there is no timetable for grief. Through planned discussions and teaching, children and young people can learn that death and dying can be talked about, understand issues around death and dying, normalise grief reactions and learn positive coping strategies.

Learning can also occur as part of planned lessons that address death and bereavement through obvious areas such as dedicated personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE), citizenship lessons and the SEAL programme. It can also be part of other subjects including English, science, history and religious education.

Lesson plans for teaching about aspects of death and dying can be downloaded from Winston's Wish ([www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-schools](http://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-schools)) and Child Bereavement UK ([childbereavementuk.org](http://childbereavementuk.org)).

When exploring issues of death and bereavement in the classroom, even through informal discussions about current events in the media, it's important to be aware of any pupils in the room who may have particular sensitivities to the issues being discussed.

Pupils who have experienced bereavements in their own pasts may find talking about such subjects stirs up emotions and memories that they are not prepared for and they can quickly feel overwhelmed.

At SeeSaw, many of the children and young people that we have supported have described experiences of subjects in the school curriculum triggering unexpected grief reactions. It may not always be obvious what will trigger a grief reaction so it would be good practice to:

- think ahead about anything you may be covering which could be potentially triggering
- know the history of the pupils in your classroom
- check with young people who've recently been bereaved whether they are happy to join in the lesson
- make clear there is no pressure to talk about personal experiences
- offer somewhere quiet to go or someone to talk to after the lesson if they are feeling upset.

### Additional resources

The following resources may be helpful for addressing death and dying in your school curriculum:

- *Helping Children Think About Bereavement* (2013) Heather Butler
- *Childhood Bereavement: Developing the Curriculum and Pastoral Support* (2004) Nina Job and Gill Frances
- *Responding to Loss and Bereavement in Schools: A Training Resource to Assess, Evaluate and Improve the School Response* (2016) John Holland



# 14 Looking after yourself

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 can be difficult. Adults often tell us that they are worried about making things worse, but it's important to remind yourself that the worst thing has already happened. You are not responsible for the child's grief and you can't carry it for them, but you can offer them support on their 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. Read up about grief and bereavement or seek advice from other professionals. Being prepared gives you more confidence and reduces anxieties about making mistakes.
- Sometimes, witnessing another person's grief can reawaken losses from our own past. Be prepared to revisit 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. Knowing how to access your support network can lighten the load and enable clearer thinking about ways forward. Most schools will have their own employment assist scheme which means there is always a professional at the end of a telephone to talk to. Teaching Unions may also offer support in these circumstances.
- It's helpful to know your limitations, so don't offer more than you can deliver. It's better to offer something small and to be consistent than to promise too much and not be able to see it through. 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.



# 15

## Template letters

These templates are intended as a guide only and can be adapted in line with the preferred format and content for your school. Please ensure that for any letter sent home to parents following a death, the wording takes into account whether you have the family's permission to name either the person who has died or the bereaved child, and what information the family have agreed can be shared.

### **Suggested wording for letter home to parents following a family bereavement:**

Dear parents/carers

Your child's class teacher/form tutor today had the sad task of telling the other children about the death of *[name if appropriate and with family's permission]* or *[a parent of one of the pupils at our school]*. The children were told that *[report exactly what the pupils were told]*.

This is a very sad time for the family, the school and the community as a whole and we are providing what support we can to the family.

We are letting you know about this sad event as your children may want to talk to you about what they have been told or want to ask questions. We hope that most children will be unaffected by what they have been told but it is best not to make assumptions. Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them. We know that children hearing about a death benefit from maintaining normal routines, being listened to and having their questions answered honestly – sticking to known facts rather than rumour.

Our thoughts are very much with the family and friends of *[XXX]* at this difficult time. We appreciate your understanding and support with this matter.



### Suggested wording for letter home to parents following the death of a pupil or member of staff:

Dear parents/carers

It is with great sadness that I share the news that one of our students/ members of staff *[name and class if appropriate and with family's permission]* died unexpectedly yesterday evening. We have informed all our students today who were told that *[report exactly what the pupils were told]*. Extra support is being given in school to those who need it by *[give details, e.g. heads of year, school nurse/school counsellors]*.

Our thoughts are with the family and friends of *[name if appropriate]* at this difficult time and we are providing what support we can to the family.

We are letting you know about this sad event as your children may want to talk to you about what they have been told or want to ask questions. When someone dies, it is normal for children/young people to feel sad and confused. Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them. We know that children hearing about a death benefit from maintaining normal routines, being listened to, having their questions answered honestly (sticking to known facts rather than rumour) and having their feelings acknowledged and normalised. I have enclosed some additional guidance for you on how best to support your children at home following this news. *[Attach Sheet 16 or 17 'Advice for parents and carers']*

We do not yet know when the funeral will take place and what the family's wishes are concerning attendance at the funeral. We will let you know when we have more information.

We appreciate your understanding and support with this matter. If you have any immediate concerns about your child in light of this news please speak to *[appropriate member of staff]* in the first instance.



# 16 Advice for parents and carers (younger children)

A death of a pupil, particularly if sudden and unexpected, can affect everyone in the school community. Where schools have to tell pupils the sad news about the death of a fellow pupil the following information may be useful for parents and carers to understand what to expect and how to respond, and in providing ongoing support at home.

We know that most young people who experience a death will not need specialist help. What they do need is the understanding, care and support of all the adults around them. In many ways this support is similar to the support you give your child at other times of upset or distress.

Children's reactions will vary. If they weren't close to the person who died, they may be unaffected. But it's best not to make assumptions. Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them. Younger children often don't have adult inhibitions about death and you may be taken aback by some of their comments, questions and reactions. Remember this is normal – for younger children it is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened.

We know that children coming to terms with the death of one of their peers will benefit from:

- Being listened to – children need your support and presence more than advice.
- Having their questions answered – it's important to acknowledge what has happened and answer any questions honestly, sticking to known facts rather than rumour. Children often have a surprising capacity to deal with the truth, if given information in simple, straightforward language, appropriate for their age and understanding.
- Having their feelings acknowledged and normalised. Don't be afraid to share your own feelings of loss. Showing young people how to express feelings can give them permission to do the same.

- Maintaining routines, such as going to school – the familiarity of their usual everyday lives and the people in them can bring security and a sense of comfort. Continue to expect usual rules of behaviour. Normality with caring and compassion is key.
- Being given opportunities to remember the person who died – encourage and listen to the telling of stories.
- Your ongoing support – watch and listen out for any continued changes in behaviour which might indicate that they are struggling. Explore the possible reasons for the changes, recognising that they may not necessarily be caused by the death.

## **Additional support**

We hope this guidance will help you to support your child through this difficult time.

If you are concerned about your child and it would be helpful to talk to someone, please contact SeeSaw for further advice or information.



# 17 Advice for parents and carers (older children)

A death of a pupil, particularly if sudden and unexpected, can affect everyone in the school community. Where schools have to tell pupils the sad news about the death of a fellow pupil the following information may be useful for parents and carers to understand what to expect and how to respond, and in providing ongoing support at home.

It's helpful to remember that grief reactions are normal when someone dies. There is no right or wrong way to feel or behave. Grief reactions will vary but the following are common reactions among bereaved young people:

- Experiencing physical symptoms such as tiredness, stomach aches and lack of energy. Sleep and eating patterns may be disturbed.
- A mixture of difficult thoughts and feelings. Sadness may be overwhelming but some young people don't cry and they should be reassured that this is ok too. Getting upset over trivial matters is common. Particularly after a sudden death there may be a sense of numbness, mixed with disbelief. Young people may become anxious, as they are more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them.
- Changes in behaviour are common and can be anything from being withdrawn to being irritable and aggressive. Feeling and expressing anger is common too.
- Loss of concentration and disorganisation can make keeping up with schoolwork hard. Your child may need more patience and extra support with managing school for a while.
- Withdrawal and loss of interest in usual activities are typical reactions in young people. Life can seem pointless and it may seem wrong to go out and have fun.

These reactions can feel confusing for young people and can sometimes be hard to manage. Reactions will vary and may not occur immediately. In contrast, some young people will remain unaffected. It can help to reassure your children that all of these are normal responses to the death of someone they care about.

We know that most young people who experience a death will not need specialist help. What they do need is the understanding, care and support of all the adults around them. In many ways this support is similar to what you would give your child at other times of upset or distress. We know that young people coming to terms with the death of another young person will benefit from:

- Your ability to understand, stay constant and keep routines and boundaries – this helps create a sense of safety when all else is in chaos.
- Being listened to – grieving young people need your support and presence more than advice.
- Having their questions answered – it's important to acknowledge what has happened and answer any questions honestly, sticking to known facts rather than rumour.
- Having their feelings acknowledged and normalised – young people may need help to manage their feelings in a safe and constructive way. Don't be afraid to share your own feelings of loss. Showing young people how to express feelings safely can give them permission to do the same.
- Being given choice about what support they need – young people like to be involved in decisions about what support they need and where and who they want it from.



- Maintaining routines, such as going to school – the familiarity of their usual everyday lives and the people in them can bring security and a sense of comfort. Continue to expect usual rules of behaviour. Normality with caring and compassion is key.
- Being given opportunities to remember the person who died – encourage and listen to the telling of stories.
- Your ongoing support – watch and listen out for any continued changes in behaviour which might indicate that they are struggling. Explore the possible reasons for the changes, recognising that they may not necessarily be caused by the death.

### **Additional support**

We hope this guidance will help you to support your child through this difficult time.

If you are concerned about your child and it would be helpful to talk to someone, please contact SeeSaw for further advice or information.



# 18 Framework for developing a school bereavement policy

It is often difficult to think clearly when a tragedy occurs, so formulating a school policy before a bereavement means you should be in a better position to cope when it happens. Every school works differently and every bereavement situation is unique, so the following guidelines are intended as a framework for planning rather than being prescriptive. The policy should be developed in a way that best suits your school.

## 1 Introduction

This should explain why it is important to have 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 who will review it. You should also cross reference this policy with any other associated policies provided by the local authority, e.g. critical incident/school trips/health and safety.

## 2 Aims of policy

This should identify who should benefit and how. 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
- development of an action plan to support staff and pupils
- accessing specialist help if necessary.”

A note should be kept of any personnel or organisations who 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 head teacher) responsible for liaising with all parties including the families directly affected

- a member of staff to co-ordinate sharing the news with the rest of the school community
- a media spokesperson
- a member of staff (possibly from the pastoral team) to co-ordinate support to pupils
- school nurse or school counsellor (if available) to offer support to staff and students
- a member of the governors 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 flowcharts on Sheets 4 and 7 to help you formulate the procedure.

You may want to look at guidelines for:

- information sharing with staff, students, parents and the wider school community
- providing support for students and for staff
- the funeral
- plans for any memorial events.

It may be helpful to plan your school's response over time, for example, immediately on hearing the news, in the first few days after hearing the news, and ongoing support in the longer term.

Remember to keep the needs of the family of the person who has died as a primary concern at all stages. They may need to be consulted about various aspects of the school response to ensure that they agree with any information that is shared, involvement in funerals, or plans for a memorial.



## **5 Letter templates**

It can be helpful to include letter templates for informing parents about the death of a pupil or member of staff or for when pupils have been told about the death of a member of another family. (See Sheet 15 'Template letters'.)

## **6 Training**

This might include a statement about providing opportunities for bereavement training.

## **7 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.



# 19 Resources

This is a list of useful books and websites for schools to support children and young people dealing with grief throughout the key stages of the national curriculum. The list is not exhaustive and items are available through normal book retail outlets or online, except where specified.

## Early Years Foundation Stage – books

*I Miss You* by Pat Thomas – A first look at death

*Lifetimes* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen – tells about beginnings, endings and lifetimes in between

*Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?* by Elke and Alex Barber – explaining a sudden death to young children

*When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown – a story guide to understanding death

*What Happens When Someone Dies: a book for adults and children to share together.* Available from SeeSaw

*What Happened to Daddy's Body* by Elke and Alex Barber – explaining what happens after death to young children

*A Place In My Heart* by Annette Aubrey – a storybook following the death of a grandfather

## Key Stage 1 – EYFS books plus

*There's No Such Thing as a Dragon* by Jack Kent – a story version of the elephant in the room

*A Terrible Thing Happened* by Margaret M Holmes – for children who have experienced a sudden death or witnessed a traumatic episode

*How Are You Feeling Today?* by Molly Potter – talking about feelings and ways to manage them

*A Volcano In My Tummy – Helping Children to Handle Anger* by Elaine Whitehouse and Warwick Pudney

*Silly Billy* by Anthony Browne – a storybook about worrying too much

*Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine* by Winston's Wish – an activity book for children when someone has died

*Badger's Parting Gifts* by Susan Varley – when Badger dies, his friends ease their sadness by remembering the special gifts he gave them

*Always and Forever* by Alan Durant – the animals talk and laugh about their memories of their friend Fox following his death

## Key Stage 2 – KS1 books plus

*Memory Bottles* by Beth Shoshan – a storybook to encourage building memories

*Remembering* by Diane Leutner (Child Bereavement Charity) – an activity book to talk about and remember the person who has died

*A Sky of Diamonds* by Camille Gibbs – a storybook for children about death, grief and hope

*The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst – a storybook to encourage continuing bonds and help with separation anxiety

*Fox and Goldfish* by Nils Pieters – a picture storybook to explore thoughts and feelings when someone is dying

*The Coat I Wear* by Mel Maxwell – a storybook following the death of a sibling

*Luna's Red Hat* by Emmi Smid – a storybook for children who have experienced someone dying by suicide

*The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside – a story that encourages children to talk about their worries

*The Sad Book* by Michael Rosen – Michael Rosen's sadness about the death of his son, for adults and children



### Key Stage 3 and 4

*When Parents Die* by Rebecca Abrams – written for older teenagers/adults

*Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers* by Earl A Grollman – easy to read, concise and informative about feelings and issues that might arise for adolescents

*When a Friend Dies* by Marilyn E Gootman – practical suggestions about what can help, full of quotes from bereaved adolescents

*Out of the Blue* by Julie Stokes and Paul Oxley – making memories last when someone has died

*Starving the Anger Gremlin* by Kate Collins-Donnelly – a CBT-based approach workbook on anger management for young people

*Starving the Anxiety Gremlin* by Kate Collins-Donnelly – a CBT-based approach workbook to support young people with anxiety

*The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends* by Helen Fitzgerald

*Still Here With Me: teenagers and children on losing a parent* by Suzanne Sjöqvist

*Things I Wish I Knew Before My Mom Died* by Ty Alexander – a memoir detailing the personal experience of the author when her mother died

*The Last Time We Say Goodbye* by Cynthia Hand – a novel about love, loss and dealing with suicide in the family

### Resources for pupils with additional needs

*I Have a Question about Death: a book for children with ASD* by Arlen Grad Gaines

*The Red Beast – Controlling Anger in Children with Asperger's Syndrome* by KI Al-Ghani

*Remembering Lucy* by Sarah Helton – helps children with special educational needs and disabilities understand feelings caused by death and loss

### Reading and resources for school staff

*Communicating with Children When a Parent is at the End of Life* by Rachel Fearnley

*Preparing a Child for Loss* by Winston's Wish

*You Just Don't Understand: Supporting bereaved teenagers* by Winston's Wish

*Never Too Young To Grieve: Supporting children under 5 after the death of a parent* by Winston's Wish

*Helping Children Cope with Grief* by Rosemary Wells – practical advice and suggestions, real-life examples of children's reactions to bereavement

*Talking About Death and Bereavement in School: How to Help Children Aged 4 to 11 to Feel Supported and Understood* by Ann Chadwick

*The Little Book of Bereavement for Schools* by Ian Gilbert

*A Special Kind of Grief* by Sarah Helton – a guide for supporting bereavement and loss in special schools

### Online resources for schools

[www.brake.org.uk](http://www.brake.org.uk)

Care for those bereaved by serious injury following a road traffic accident

[www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)

Supports families and educates professionals when a baby or a child of any age dies, is dying, or when a child is facing bereavement

[www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)

Provides a directory of organisations around the country that can offer local bereavement support to families and young people

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Supports young people (age 12–21) who are affected by cancer – either that of a family member or if they are ill themselves

[www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

Resources and support for prevention of young suicide, including helpline

[www.hopeagain.org.uk](http://www.hopeagain.org.uk)

Hope Again is the youth website of Cruse Bereavement Care. A resource for learning from other young people how to cope with grief and feel less alone.

[www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)

Confidential, non-judgemental support, 24hrs/day, for people experiencing distressing feelings or despair

[www.samm.org.uk](http://www.samm.org.uk)

Offers emotional support to those bereaved through murder or manslaughter, in this country or abroad

<https://uk-sobs.org.uk>

Phone and email support for adult (over 18) survivors of bereavement by suicide

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

Charity for bereaved children, supporting families and professionals dealing with bereavement of parents and siblings

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



Grief support  
for children and  
young people  
in Oxfordshire

**SeeSaw**

Bush House  
2 Merewood Avenue  
Oxford OX3 8EF

Enquiries and advice line:

**01865 744 768**

Email: [info@seesaw.org.uk](mailto:info@seesaw.org.uk)

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

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Registered company no 3790965  
Published October 2018