



Supporting **children** and **young people** with bereavement

Unfortunately, the sad fact of the pandemic is that many schools will be having to support children and young people after a bereavement. In this resource we look at how bereavement can affect a child and strategies to support.

The death of a close family member is one of the most fundamental losses that a child will ever experience and without the right support it can lead to a range of problems.



Note:

Hearing people talk about bereavement can sometimes remind us of our own losses, and so you may need to look after yourself whilst you take care of those around you.

How can bereavement affect a child?

The death of a close family member has been shown to be a risk factor for children and young people. Links have been shown to:

- lower academic attainment
- lower aspirations for continued learning
- increase in physical health complaints
- increase in risk taking behaviours
- higher levels of anxiety and depression (into adulthood)
- increased risk of school exclusion
- increase in youth offending.

Like adults, children find it hard to talk about difficult things. Unlike adults, even if they do want to express themselves, they may not know how. They will rely on the adults in their life to help them and show them how to do this.

How does grief affect a child?

Grief produces complicated feelings that some children will not have the vocabulary to name or describe. Following a death, children may experience the following.

- **Anxiety** - difficulty leaving a parent or becoming overly anxious about everyday tasks.
- **Sadness** – becoming quiet and withdrawn.
- **Avoidance** – may avoid things that remind them about death, including topics or conversations.
- **Impaired ability to concentrate or focus** – this may be because of their grief and/or specific anxieties.
- **Extreme tiredness.**
- **Anger or acting out difficult behaviour** – which may mask sadness and low mood.
- **Sleep difficulties** – fears, nightmares or dreams, especially if there has been confusion about what happened to the person who died.
- **Guilt** – especially if they connect something they said or did with the death; for example, an argument.
- **Physical complaints** – distress is often expressed physically, but sometimes complaints may mirror those of the deceased.

Returning to school after a bereavement

Returning to school after a death is an important transition. Some children are keen to return as soon as possible; others may feel anxious about returning. Sometimes parents or carers want to keep them at home. Whatever the circumstances, you will need to consider how best to support their return to school. This might include having a designated person or place that they can go to if they need some time out or support, and thinking with them about how best to share their news. Sometimes a phased return, for instance, coming in after assembly, is helpful.

Talking about bereavement

The most important thing that you can do for children is acknowledge the death and offer them the chance to talk about it. Discussing a death with a child can seem like a very tall order, but remember, nothing you say will make it worse because the worst has already happened.

Initially it may be useful to say things like:

"I am so sorry to hear that your mum died" or

"I am here if you would like to talk"

"I don't know what else to say, except I am here if you need me".

Communication, Communication, Communication.

As with many things, good communication can be so helpful. Pupils benefit greatly if all staff who come into contact with them are aware of their loss because it can help avoid unnecessarily painful comments; for example, *"Can you ask your mum to..."* or *"Why have you not done your homework?"* (after a funeral).

Helping peers to think through how to talk about and support a bereaved classmate is one of the most effective interventions, especially if this is coupled with talking to the bereaved pupil about what they would like communicated to the class.



Bereavement policy

Whilst it is not possible to cover all eventualities, a simple bereavement policy could help you to be proactive rather than reactive. The preparation and involvement of staff is often as important as the document itself, but a good strategy will help to guide and support everyone during a potentially difficult time.



Extra support

There may be instances where you feel that you need to seek extra support for the children or you would like to think through the best approach to supporting a child in school.

 **Winston's Wish** has a Freephone Helpline (**08088 020 021**) available for parents or professionals to call between **9am and 5pm Monday – Friday**.

 **Winston's Wish** also have an e-mail service for families and professionals to access through their website. They will try to answer you within one working day.

 Some schools have benefited from further training either as a whole school or sending a few staff members to their study days.

 Further information about organisations that offer support to bereaved children can be found on the **Childhood Bereavement Network's** website.

 For adults who need extra help, **Cruse** offer a range of services across the UK.