

# St Vincent's School for Blind and Partially Sighted Children

Policy Document Title:	Guidelines on Managing Bereavement
To be read in conjunction with:	Staff Handbook – Foreseeable Crisis
Updated:	07/09 JA
To be reviewed:	07/10

## St. Vincent's School Mission Statement:

*Inspired by the example of St. Vincent, we work together in a safe and caring atmosphere, where a high standard of education and care are provided.*

*We encourage a sense of achievement, self-worth, moral responsibility and mutual respect, honouring all faith traditions and beliefs. Each one of us in our community is special and unique. Gifts and talents are valued and nurtured through all our work.*

*We are outward looking in our approach to the wider educational and social community and we encourage all our young people to become independent and to integrate fully into society.*

There are many different ways in which we may encounter grief and loss, and a range of settings in which they may occur. This is not a definitive guide to all situations.

## Crisis Response

Be clear that all information, decisions about actions and press statements come from or through the Principal or from a designated person. Make sure that information and ideas can be passed to the Principal quickly. All staff are issued with telephone cards with relevant phone numbers.

Communicate accurate information to pupils and their parents as soon as possible. It is usually best to inform pupils in class groups rather than in a large assembly. If possible send pupils home with a letter to their parents setting out clearly any information which is public knowledge.

Check carefully with the family involved about what they would like, for example about representative pupils attending the funeral. Parents may need some guidance in this matter e.g. research shows that parents try to “protect” children, where as honesty has been shown to be the best way.

Gather the staff as a group; make sure that they are informed and that anyone who is particularly distressed is supported. Staff most involved with the child who has died will often be most distressed and also most needed by the child’s close friends. Continue such meetings as required. It is important to make sure that all staff are informed, as well as the governors and as appropriately the placing Local Authority.

Help/support/advice may be needed in managing media or from the school psychologist.

Consider how to mark the event in school. Tell pupils at an early stage that this consideration is being given and invite their ideas without promising to accept every suggestion. By making it clear that this is a whole school issue it may be possible to avoid inappropriate reactions from the pupils without hurting their feelings. Explain that ‘life goes on and that routine is helpful’; it is still acceptable to enjoy life and have fun.

Considers ways of supporting pupils and staff. These could range from allowing time in form groups with tutors before normal timetable is resumed to bringing in counsellors to offer individual or group support. Closing the school is not always a good idea as children may be at a loss for somewhere to go and may be unsupported even by their friends.

Pupils and staff responses will be variable in severity and longevity it is important to acknowledge that some people take longer than others to accommodate the loss. The experience however is lifelong. Bear this in mind when providing support and also when considering effect on exam performance especially when course work is part of the assessment.

## How to help individual children

- ❖ Just be aware, this will change your reactions and this will show.
- ❖ Explain that children are not to blame, children take on utterly unreal guilt.
- ❖ Some children may believe that their anger and ill-wishing can actually cause damage.
- ❖ Sharing your experience, even of minor grief, is a great help.
- ❖ Allow the child to be sad; don't distract from grief. Do encourage activities that are enjoyed as soon as the child is ready. Expect rapid and repeated change of mood.
- ❖ Explain physical symptoms, lump in throat, heavy heart etc.
- ❖ Be prepared to explain, if it seems appropriate from the behaviour of the child or the parent, that sad people often cry, get cross easily, feel guilty, dream about the person they have lost imagine seeing the person in a crowd, imagine hearing voices and footsteps.
- ❖ Expect behaviour regression. Don't try to change it too soon.
- ❖ The child may need – to be kept warm, to have extra rest, to have soft easily eaten food, to have old favourite toy available.
- ❖ Watch out for bullying and teasing.
- ❖ Ask if the child want to know anything. Answer questions truthfully but very simply. If you don't know, say so. If there are many different opinions, for example, about Heaven, say so. If you know well enough what the child's family tradition is, explain this as the family belief.
- ❖ Children may not have the words to ask for the information that they really want so check after you have answered – is that what you wanted to know? They will often ask the same question over and over again, because they need to do so. Be patient!
- ❖ Encourage physical exercise. This is a great help when children feel low.

- ❖ The company of friends helps. Encourage other children to welcome the child back into the group as soon as he or she is ready to join in activities. This welcome may be needed several times a day.
- ❖ Keep the needs of the child in mind. Sometimes there is no grief at first because the child is numb, it strikes after several days or even weeks and often persists to some degree for as long as two years.
- ❖ The child may be afraid of the other parent dying, especially if the parent is unwell, as often happens. Allow the child to express the fear and be realistically reassuring.
- ❖ Encourage the child to talk about the person, to keep memories alive.

### Stages of Grief

Shock: denial, anger, guilt, depression, acceptance.

### Age Related Grief

- ❖ **3 to 5 years** - Children are aware of death and ask questions. They need honest, simple answers and often words which they overhear need to be explained. It is difficult for them to express how they feel. They need to have things explained many times. Though they seem to ask increasingly 'sensible' questions they are still at the age of 'magical' thinking and may think that because they felt anger they have actually caused harm. They need reassurance that they are not responsible. They take language literally; consider the impact of "She lost her baby," "Granny just went to sleep and didn't wake up," "The old dog was put to sleep".
- ❖ **5 to 8 years** - Children are developing an awareness of time and the future and 'never come home again'. They often still believe that they caused the separation or loss though they may have in their minds a more rational reason. They will deny their own feelings very quickly, either because they find them too painful to cope with or to protect the adults around them.

- ❖ **8 to 12 years** - There is less magical thinking but the children are more able to appreciate what the loss will mean and to worry about practical things like money. They need to be able to discuss the future and not be over-protected. This can lead to worse, hidden anxiety. They may appear to cope without any problems at all but it is important to encourage them to talk about the loss rather than deny its impact. They may cling to some memento of the lost person. Uncharacteristic behaviour such as stealing is not uncommon and there may be some 'babyish' behaviour.
- ❖ **Adolescence** - A hard time anyway. Self-confidence often low. Teens often identify with a role model e.g. pop star, changing from week to week. Can over-identify with lost parent, e.g. I must become a doctor like my dad; may need help to recognise and deal with anger over 'desertion' so that they can let go of it. Boys especially, who have lost a father, may find it hard to reach an adult identity, aggression is common. Girls are often depressed, may become 'little caretaker', bossy and controlling to mask pain and protect from feelings of emptiness.

### **Some signs of depression**

For a few weeks these are **normal** reactions to bereavement. It is only if they persist that medical advice should be sought. Some may influence school performance.

- ❖ Pervasive, continuous sadness
- ❖ Difficulty in concentration
- ❖ Over eating
- ❖ Under eating
- ❖ Not sleeping
- ❖ Over sleeping
- ❖ Irritability
- ❖ Memory lapses
- ❖ Loss of confidence
- ❖ Feeling of great tiredness
- ❖ Loneliness

## ❖ Regression

### **How to help children as a group to be prepared for loss**

- ❖ Take opportunities;
- ❖ Be very sensitive;
- ❖ Be very simple;
- ❖ Tell the truth, but remember that the whole truth may not be appropriate;
- ❖ Listen very carefully to questions, there may be a lot behind them.

Children need to know that a dead body does not suffer pain, or feel cold or hot, and that it does not need food or drink. If they are not clear about this the thought of burial can be very frightening.

Be aware of different cultural practices, eg Jewish and Muslim funerals very soon after death.

Teach by using 'little' deaths; either of a pet or of someone known but not close. Maybe, if the children wish, bury a dead pet or talk about doing so.

Give the opportunity for them to ask questions about funerals etc. This should not be done as a group when one particular child is vulnerable.

If you offer support to someone, for example sending flowers and sympathy cards to a member of staff, let the children know what is being done. They need to know how to offer support and when to do so.

Story telling and books can help to normalise experience.

Remind children to be kind to each other and to the family. When everyone is sad it is easy to fall out with each other.

If a child has attended a funeral and wants to talk about it don't discourage the subject.

All input should be child led – it is not necessarily appropriate for adults to introduce the topic.

### **How to help yourself and other adults**

Accept the fact that dealing with sadness is upsetting.

Make sure that you have someone to talk to about your own feelings. This could be a friend, or possibly, if you feel there is an issue of confidentiality, a more senior member of staff.

Be prepared to offer support by listening to others who are stressed by coping with grief in children. This is often all that is needed but it is very important.

Don't make assumptions about how people will be feeling. They might share a child's sadness, feel angry with parents who seem insensitive to the child's needs, be enraged by the injustice of what has happened, or have emotions from their own past brought to the surface.