



ST VINCENT'S SCHOOL

A Specialist School for Sensory Impairment and Other Needs

Policy Document Title: Bereavement Policy
To be read in conjunction with: Working with Parents and Carers Policy
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**This policy is available on the school intranet and website www.stvin.com*

Introduction

Adults often try to protect children from any form of emotional pain in an attempt to fulfil their ideal of childhood being a time of trouble free growth and development. No matter how hard they try, parents, teachers and other adults cannot shield children from the effect of death.

Young people need support to enable them to understand and cope with their bereavement and allow them to continue their education in a purposeful way. Providing an opportunity to talk about the deceased, express feelings and have this major life event recognised may be all that school needs to do to allow this process to happen.

The following are some of the principles staff may find useful in supporting the bereaved.

Talk

As soon as possible after the death find time to talk with the child/children. It may require some flexibility, within school, for each class to be informed about a death and given time to express their feelings. There should be an agreed 'end' of this session to allow the school to resume some sort of routine.

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

Ensure that all staff, governors and, as appropriate, the placing Local Authority, are informed and that anyone who is particularly distressed is supported. Staff most involved with a child who has died will often be most distressed and maybe the most needed by the child's close friends.

Terminology (See also Appendix 1)

When informing pupils of a bereavement use the correct word e.g. "death", "dead" and avoid euphemisms and phrases such as "lost", 'sleeping' 'gone away' etc. Accurate terminology assists the understanding that death is permanent.

Acknowledge feelings

Explain your own feelings. Death evokes difficult feelings, avoid saying "everything will be all right". It does not feel alright and the future will be different for the school and everyone involved. If you are moved to tears this will give the child permission to cry.

Physical contact may be required e.g. holding a hand or an arm on the shoulder. Being with the child when they are crying, and offering a tissue is support.

Comprehension

Consider the age and the ability of the children, and match the appropriate intervention. (See Appendix 2 for further guidance.)

Questions

Children may have questions. Answer these questions factually. Don't be afraid to say "I don't know the answer to your question".

Behaviour

People tend to experience a range of emotions when they experience a death. These include being shocked, sad, angry, guilty, anxious, relieved, lonely, and/or irritable – and children are no exception. Individuals are surprised when they find that news of a death can unlock feelings of their own personal bereavements, in some cases from many years ago. This is quite natural.

Be aware of any change in behaviour. Aggression in the playground may indicate that a child is feeling angry. It is common for bereaved children to experience learning difficulties through lack of

concentration or distraction. Tiredness may be the result of a genuine effect of grief. Anxiety or embarrassment may cause children to giggle or display 'silly behaviour'. This indicates that they have taken the death seriously but are unable to cope with their emotions. Such behaviour does not mean that they do not care.

Bereaved children can react in many different ways. The normally placid child who becomes aggressive and lashes out at others is easy to identify, but from experience, the child who is apparently unaffected by death, completes their work on time and shows themselves to be a 'model pupil' and 'obviously over the death', could be finding the bereavement equally difficult to cope with.

Research has shown that the bereaved tend to suffer more from ailments, such as stomach ache, feeling sick or headaches, than those who are not bereaved. It is also a fact that many suffer from a lack of concentration, tiredness, be worried about surviving family members and simply have "good days and "bad days".

Parents/Carers

If possible, consult the parent(s) of the children that are finding the bereavement particularly difficult and establish what they have told their child(ren) about the death. They will learn of your sensitivity and concern if you communicate with them. It could be that the family have had a recent bereavement and the death of another has brought back feelings of grief. For those young people who do not have verbal communication the Principal, Deputy Principal or Family Liaison Officer will ring home and explain to parents what has happened. Class teachers can use the Daily Journal to discuss issues with parents and raise concerns if necessary.

The funeral and saying goodbye.

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.

- Talk about funerals. Some children regret not being given the opportunity to make their own informed decisions about attending the funeral.
- Think about ways children can say "goodbye" to the person who has died. This may be an activity that is already going on in school.

- Consider how to mark the event in school e.g. a whole school assembly (See Appendix 4). Tell pupils at an early stage that this consideration is being given and invite their ideas without promising to accept every suggestion.
- Talk to pupils about their beliefs about what happens to people after they die. E.g. God, Heaven, Reincarnation, Memories etc.
- Talk about memories, good ones and ones that are not so good. It is important for children to have honest memories of the person that died.
- Introduce a practical task e.g. collage or memories/memory box/pictures of happy times shared with the deceased person etc.
- Lasting memorials, such as a trophy or a tree in memory of the person that died can often be useful.
- Try to identify any key answers that you may need to prepare, e.g. the facts about an illness, or dates which may be relevant to the death such as end of school year and changing class or schools.

It is important to remember that there is no “right” way to handle the difficulty of informing a child about a death or supporting them through the bereavement process.

An honest and open approach to life and death is generally the way that it is approached at St Vincent’s School. Pupils are encouraged to think positively about those who have died, to talk about the individual and to be proud that they have known them. Pupils cannot be protected from death or the pain of bereavement and for that reason we promote open communication.

Bereavement can last; Christmas, Mothers day, birthdays, Fathers day etc. or dates relating to illness or death can be difficult times for children/staff.

Dealing with the media

Be clear that all information, decisions about actions and press statements come from or through the Principal or 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. Help/support/advice may be needed in managing media or from the school psychologist.

Appendix 1

Informing Children and Young People

People often think that children do not grieve, but even very young children will want to know what, how and why a death happened and possibly what will happen next.

Providing young people with the support necessary to enable them to talk about the dead person, express their feelings and have their major life-event recognised may be all that schools have to do to allow this process to happen. The following guidelines will help inform children of the death of a child or member of staff.

- “I’ve got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. There is an illness called cancer. Sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it.....”
- “Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. Sadly, there are some accidents that cause people to die. I have some really sad news to tell you that might upset you.....”
- “Sometimes people become ill and despite going to hospital do not get better. I am sorry to tell you that.....died”.
- Refer to name naturally, “.....died”.
- Children and young people will appreciate time to verbalise their feelings and fears. Allow space for “If only’s” to be acknowledged.
- Discussion – allow pupils to share their own experiences of death, e.g. “When my pet/my Gran died”, etc.
- Be honest about your own feelings and experiences, and talk honestly about the relationship that you had with the person.
- Answer pupil’s questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like “passed away” or lost etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children.
- Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. The absence of a response does not mean that a child does not care.

Appendix 2

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 may need to have things explained many times. Although 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. They often still believe that they caused the separation or loss, although 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 is not uncommon.
- **Adolescence** - A hard time anyway; self-confidence is often low. They can over-identify with a lost parent, e.g. I must become a doctor like my dad. They 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.

Appendix 3

How to help individual children

- Expect behaviour regression; don't try to change it too soon.
- Allow the child to be sad; don't distract from grief.
- Expect repeated changes of mood.
- Keep the needs of the child in mind. Sometimes there is no grief at first because the child is numb.
- Explain that the child is not to blame, children take on unreal guilt; some children believe that their anger or ill-wishing can actually cause damage.
- Explain physical symptoms - lump in throat, heavy heart etc.
- Share an experience, even of minor grief, it may help.
- Be prepared to explain; sad people often cry, get cross easily, feel guilty, dream about the person, imagine seeing the person, hearing voices and footsteps.
- Answer questions truthfully but very simply. If you don't know, say so.
- The child may need – to be kept warm, to have extra rest, to have soft easily eaten food, to have an old favourite toy available.
- Children may not have the words to ask for 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. Be patient!
- Watch out for bullying and teasing.
- Encourage physical exercise. This is a great help when children feel low.
- Encourage other children to welcome the child back into the class/group as soon they are ready to join in.
- The child may be afraid of the other parent dying, especially if the parent is unwell. Allow the child to express the fear and be realistically reassuring.
- Encourage the child to talk about the person, to keep memories alive.
- Talk about feelings, they are our way of discharging stress and coming to terms with feelings.
- Sudden death, violent death, death of a young person, is especially hard to understand and disruption of sleep, appetite, daily activities is a normal response to an abnormal or unusual question.

- The school uses the services of YPAS (Young Peoples Advisory Service). Pupils can be referred via the Learning and Family Support Coordinator to this service

Appendix 4

Ideas for an assembly to remember someone in your school who has died

Purpose of the assembly	Things that can help
To bring the school together	Using an appropriate story or reading to prompt discussion.
To repeat and confirm the news that someone has died.	Singing an appropriate song or piece of music.
To reinforce messages about grief e.g. is it fine to cry.	Lighting a candle and having time to reflect.
To share and normalise feelings	Suggesting that the next day each class will make something to capture memories, feelings e.g. collage or salt sculpture.
To identify someone that pupils can talk to on an ongoing basis – grief doesn't go away overnight.	Displaying materials that classes have made to remember the person who died.
To confirm details of the funeral and the schools response to the funeral.	Releasing balloons or bubbles to say goodbye.
To pray for the family and person who has died.	Inviting ideas for a lasting memorial.

Which staff should be involved in the assembly?

- All staff who work at the school should ideally be present at the assembly.
- The responsibility for running the assembly can be shared by a group of staff or with someone connected with the school, but less involved.
- It is fine for staff to show how they feel at an assembly – this will help the children understand what feelings are normal feelings of grief.
- The assembly may well be very moving for everyone involved so needs a clear beginning, middle and a positive end.