



Notting Hill Preparatory School

2.7 Policy for Bereavement and Loss

(EYFS & KS1-3)

Reviewer responsible: **Deputy Head Pastoral**
Reviewed by: **HF**

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BEREAVEMENT AND LOSS POLICY

Introduction

No matter how prepared we think we are, death or loss or separation is often traumatic and unexpected. Its unpredictability can severely unbalance a school whose normal working environment is one based on routine. Death therefore can be regarded as a potentially disunifying force that exists in an unpredictable world. Conversely, it can also be unifying, bringing people together in their grief.

This policy outlines the school's procedures for coping with bereavement and loss where it affects pupils, staff and parents. It is important that staff understand how best they can support a child or family in the immediate and long term. Staff training from a bereavement counsellor is organised as appropriate, and the School Counsellor gives guidance and support as necessary.

Definition

The dictionary defines **grief** as 'deep sorrow'. Children's grief must never be underestimated. They have special difficulties and needs that must be met. Sometimes they may need to express their grief through actions rather than words. Children usually learn about death and loss through seeing how it affects those closest to them. If it is not talked about or the truth is hidden for too long, children will pick up the tense atmosphere and make up their own 'stories' which they may not be able to articulate and which may often be 'worse' than the reality, for example that they, too, may die. Grieving means feeling and expressing all their emotions. It also means slowly accepting the reality of what has happened and learning to cope with change that has taken place in their life. Grieving isn't about forgetting the person who has died. It is about finding a permanent place for that person in their life, where it does not cause so much pain.

Bereavement is the process by which a person grieves for that which they have lost. It is a healing process, but one in which they need the support of others. In traumatic situations the adults themselves have no structures to hold onto i.e. the function of social, religious, and family-approached grief. These adults may also find it very difficult to give the child reassurances that they will be safe, and alternatively the child may find reassurance of safety a difficult process to absorb given the traumatic events. Effects of grief, particularly traumatic grief, be it primary or secondary involvement, alters the child's world instantly.

Understanding grief and loss associated with death and other forms of significant separation

From the following statistics it is inevitable that staff will be caring for children who have experienced significant losses, although not always associated with death. For example:

- Marriages ending in divorce
- Children seeing their parents' marriage break up
- Having 'step' parents or siblings
- A parent losing a partner through death
- Losing a parent or a sibling or other relative

Stages of Grief

The following stages of grief have been researched and documented (E. Kubler Ross in *Living with death and dying* (Souvenir Press)). It is, however, vital to understand that an adult or child's grief is very individual and they may experience the stages in a different order and in different intensities or not in many/any discernable 'stages' at all. Support must be based on an awareness of the individual.

1. Early grief
 - a. Shock/numbness
 - b. Alarm
 - c. Denial/disbelief
2. Acute grief
 - a. Yearning/pining
 - b. Searching
 - c. Strong feelings or sadness/anger/guilt

3. Integration of loss

(See **Appendix 1**: Children's reactions to grief: what they think, feel and do, based on developmental stages)

When a child grieves

A child's capacity to sustain sad emotions increases with age and maturity. An apparent lack of overt sadness can lead a parent or teacher to believe a child is unaffected by the loss.

Normal signs of grief in children, particularly young children, include bed wetting, loss of appetite, tummy upsets, restlessness, disturbed sleep, nightmares, crying, attention seeking behaviour, difficulty concentrating, increased anxiety and clinginess. These only become a cause for concern when they occur over a prolonged period of time.

Older children often display changes in personality and alterations in their normal behaviour including signs of depression, sleep and appetite disturbances, angelic behaviour, rudeness, learning problems, lack of concentration and refusal to go to school. School work may be affected by underachieving or overworking. Boys, particularly teenagers, are likely to experience difficulties at school in the early months following parental death, but bereaved children do not necessarily develop long term learning problems.

In adolescents, a bereavement can cause regression to a younger, more dependent stage in their development. Emotions may be suppressed, resulting in a display of apparent indifference or lack of feelings. In a search for love and affection they may develop premature new sexual relationships. Others can become silent, withdrawn and self critical. Many young people will grieve privately and shed their tears in the solitude of their own rooms, maintaining a brave face in society.

Children's understanding of death

Children and young people mature at different rates and their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age. **Appendix 2** gives a table of age categories and the responses generally associated with these age groups, but it is important to realise that these are only guidelines and responses do vary and occur at other ages.

Possible types of loss affecting children

- Sudden or unexpected death of parent/sibling
- Painful or horrifying death of parent/sibling
- Slow, expected death of incurable conditions
- Death of grandparent, close relative, friend, teacher, pet
- Separation (short or long term) from parent through divorce, family breakdown, demands of job, imprisonment
- Being placed in care (relative, foster/social services care)
- Moving country (refugee, economic asylum seekers and relocation)
- Moving house
- Loss of parental attention, for example, new baby, ill sibling
- Illnesses or accidents causing loss of health, ability or confidence
- Loss of childminder/nanny or other significant carer

The more able the school is in addressing change, endings and the feeling of loss in all children and especially those more vulnerable to loss, the more the children will be able to cope with any significant losses they may experience.

How school can help

Most grieving pupils do not need a 'bereavement expert', they need people who care. Schools, just by carrying on with their usual day to day activities, can do a huge amount to support a grieving child. The following are some helpful things schools can offer children and young people experiencing loss and grief:

- **Normality.** For a child or young person, whose life has been turned upside down, the routines of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may have fallen apart but school and the people within it are still there, offering a sense of security and continuity.

- **Relief from grief.** For young children and adolescents, school can give relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home. They may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family. There may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young people can find this difficult to deal with.
- **An outlet for grief.** When a parent or sibling has died, children and young people can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be all right. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief.
- **A listening ear.** Children can be overlooked by family members struggling to deal with their own grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm.
- **The opportunity to be a child.** Even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. Loss and grief are very grown up experiences. School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty.
- **General support.** Keep in contact with home. Discuss concerns but equally important are successes. The family or carers will find this reassuring. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the child is coping.
- **Resources.** Have in school a selection of resources on the subject. Stories are a wonderful way to gently introduce young children to the concept of death. Novels and poems offer young people a chance to learn through reading, listening and discussion. See **Appendix 3** for Support Ideas and Resources.

Some 'do's

- **Do** let your genuine concern and care show.
- **Do** be available to listen or help with whatever seems appropriate. Be prepared to listen and listen and listen again.
- **Do** allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share. With children, open ended questions such as 'I was wondering what you were thinking about?' may encourage them to talk.
- **Do** encourage them to be patient with themselves and not to impose any 'shoulds' on themselves.
- **Do** talk about the person who has died, including any special, endearing qualities about that person.
- **Do** reassure them they did everything they could and that they are not responsible (it is very common for children to feel that in some way they caused the death).
- **Do** offer practical help – this could be the most important thing in the early stages.

Some 'don't's

- **Don't** let your feeling of helplessness keep you from reaching out.
- **Don't** use euphemisms or half truths, for example 'Mummy has gone away', 'Daddy is sleeping forever', 'God took Mummy because she was so good'. Use the words that the child needs – 'died', 'killed', 'separated', 'divorced' and the faith concepts that are relevant to that family, for example 'with Jesus in Heaven'.
- **Don't** avoid the child/parent because you feel uncomfortable as this can add pain to an already painful situation.
- **Don't** say anything that implies a judgement on how the child is feeling, for example, 'Are you feeling better now?'
- **Don't** tell them how they should be feeling, for example, 'You must be feeling very sad' as a child's reaction to death and loss may be very different from ours as adults.
- **Don't** distract or change the subject at the mention of the loss.
- **Don't** avoid mentioning the loss out of fear of reminding them of the pain – they have not forgotten it.
- **Don't** try to find something positive to say, for example, 'closer family ties', or 'at least you have each other' or anything for which they should be grateful.
- **Don't** suggest they can 'replace' the loss in some way.
- **Don't** forget that grief is a life-changing event that has ongoing consequences.

It is worth remembering that although you cannot take away the hurt, you can at least help the child/adult feel less alone.

Procedure for dealing with the death of a pupil's parent, sibling or close member of the family

- Inform all the staff as soon as possible, including peripatetic staff, giving as much information as possible.
- Decide on a team of key and support staff (the headmistress, the form teacher, the SENCO, school counsellor, someone who has particularly close relationship with the child) who will support and monitor the grieving process.
- Before child comes back to school Headmistress should speak to the family and/or child to establish if pupil would like her (or another member of staff) to explain to friends or classmates what has happened. Child may like this to be done by school or to do it with headmistress, or not at all – although it would be preferable for peers to know as they will find out at some point and it is better to be told in a controlled manner rather than to find out through rumours circulating.
- It is more appropriate that this should be done in the more intimate setting of a classroom rather than at an assembly.
- Staff may need an update on bereavement guidance (from our School Counsellor or from Child Bereavement UK who do specific training if needed). The school counsellor holds the school information pack which includes guides for supporting bereaved pupils, parents and/or carers as well as other useful guides for dealing with bereavement.
- Find out what the child has been told about the loss and any religious or cultural beliefs that are relevant to the child.
- Give child time and opportunity to talk or for his/her questions to be answered.
- Observe any changes in the child's behaviour and handle those changes with patience and understanding.
- Write up observations that would be helpful to team/parent/carer or other professionals.
- Show the child that it is all right to cry or feel angry or 'different' and provide a secure area for child to be – perhaps in the Headmistress's office.
- Refer to the guidelines given above in this policy to support and reassure the bereaved child.
- A file of resources and advice for class activities is kept in the Counsellor's office which staff are encouraged to refer to at any time.

Procedure for managing the death of a member of the school community (staff or child)

A death within the school community can have a huge effect on the school as a whole and can affect the school community in different ways and depends on:

- The role the deceased person had in school
- How well known they were in the local community
- Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide or other violent deaths

It is very important that adults and children are kept informed of a death. Rumour and gossip can be very damaging and can lead to both young and old developing the attitude that the death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity and if they are not informed of the circumstances or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be obstructed.

The following procedures should be followed:

- The Headmistress and the Senior Management Team, in consultation with the chair of governors, should gather information as quickly as possible.
- In the case of the death of a child, whether at home or school, the Headmistress, would, if possible, consult with the deceased's family or relatives to discuss the breaking of news to the school community.
- In the case of a member of staff, the Headmistress or a member of the senior management team would gather details surrounding the death in order to have full and accurate information before reporting to staff.
- A staff meeting would be held at the earliest convenience to inform all staff and allow them time for private grief before breaking the news to the whole school – note should be made of absent staff who would also need to be informed, as well as peripatetic staff.

- A clear account should be given of events leading up to the death with a factual explanation of how death occurred. To avoid rumours, it is important to be open and honest wherever possible and not to make assumptions about the cause of death.
- Confidentiality is essential.
- It is important that all staff and pupils be informed as quickly as possible although consideration as to the correct procedure should be agreed first.
- After a short assembly for the announcement, the matter should be dealt with within the confines of the classroom, allowing children the chance to share feelings.
- Prior to the assembly the Headmistress should discuss with staff how they feel about this as some staff may not feel confident in handling such emotions and reactions. Extra support may be needed for these staff.
- Where it is thought necessary we will engage a professional bereavement counsellor to work with staff or children.
- Parents must be informed by letter.
- If dealings with the media are necessary, it is important that this is done by the Chair of the Governors, the Headmistress or the designated spokesperson/governor – no other member of staff should talk to the media. This is covered in detail in the policy **Dealing with a critical incident**.
- A staff meeting should be arranged at the end of the day for everyone to talk about how they are coping and whether anyone needs extra support or company, if they might be alone.
- Arrange staff condolences with collaborative agreement if felt appropriate.

Holding a memorial

After a death, we can often be left with a strong urge to 'do something' which marks the significance of the death and which states its importance to us. For family members this is usually the funeral or a ceremony of some other sort. It is not always either appropriate or possible for school children to attend these occasions though, so facilitating something within the school context is very important. The following are a few ideas that are easy to do, yet significant. They could be combined.

- Light a candle and reflect.
- Listen to some music – maybe a significant piece to the person who has died.
- Create a memory box or book. Invite pupils to write a memory in the book about the person who has died, or place an object that means something to them and that has a story attached to it in the memory box. This box could then be displayed, or kept, or presented to the family of the person who died. (Children can make mistakes, which in sensitive circumstances can upset, so it would be a good idea for them to write on cards which are then stuck into the book so that staff can vet them first.)
- Plant a tree in memory of the person.
- Create a plaque or wall display to commemorate their life.
- Were they sporty? Name a cup after them and hold an annual sports tournament to win the trophy, present it to the most improved sportsperson of the year.
- Did they like singing or acting? Hold a performance event in their honour.
- Invite pupils to write poems, songs and letters to or about the person who died.
- Hold a balloon release ceremony where pupils each attach a message to helium filled balloons, and then all release them together.
- Hold a minute's silence.
- If they died of an illness, raise funds to support an appropriate charity that works with sufferers of that illness.

SEE APPENDIX 4 FOR 'SAYING GOODBYE' ASSEMBLY PLAN

Resources and further reading (held in the School Counsellor's office):

- Age related reactions to bereavement (Rucksack training programme 2006)
- Grieving 5-10 year olds
- Grieving under 5
- Winston's Wish

Appendix 1

Children's Reactions to Grief

What They Think, Feel and Do Based on Developmental Stage

Age	Thinks	Feels	Does
3-5 Years <i>(pre-school)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Death is temporary and reversible • Finality of death is not evident • Death mixed up with trips, sleep • May wonder what the deceased is doing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sad • Anxious • Withdrawn • Confused about changes • Angry • Scared • Cranky • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cry • Fight • Become interested in dead things • Act as if the death never happened
6-9 Years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About the finality of death • About the biological processes of death • Death is related to mutilation • A spirit gets you when you die • Their actions and words caused the death • About who will care for them if a parent dies • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sad • Withdrawn • Confused about the changes • Angry • Scared • Cranky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act aggressively • Become withdrawn • Have nightmares • Act like it never happened • Lack concentration • Have a decline in grades
9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About and understands the finality of death • Death is difficult to talk about • The death may happen again, and feels anxious • About death with humour • About what will happen if their parent(s) die • Their actions and words caused the death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vulnerable • Anxious • Scared • Lonely • Confused • Angry • Sad • Abandoned • Guilty • Fearful • Worried 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behave aggressively • Become withdrawn • Talk about physical aspects of death • Act like it never happened • Have nightmares • Lack concentration • Have a decline in grades
Teenagers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About and understands the finality of death • If they show their feelings, they'll be weak • They need to be in control of their feelings • About death with humour • Only about life before or after the death • Their actions or words caused the death 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vulnerable • Anxious • Scared • Lonely • Confused • Angry • Sad • Abandoned • Guilty • Fearful • Worried • Isolated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behave aggressively • Become withdrawn • Allow themselves to be in danger • Grieve for what might have been • Have nightmares • Lack concentration • Have a decline in grades

Source: Center for Grief and Healing www.griefandhealing.org

Appendix 2

Children's Understanding of Death

The age categories given are guidelines only and it is important to realise that responses do vary and occur at other ages.

2-5 Years

Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality. Some may expect the dead person to reappear –“shall we dig granny up now?” They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as “gone away” or “gone to sleep”. Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened. As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death. They are prone to fantasize at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something more scary than reality.

5-8 Years

At about five years of age most children realise that dead people are different from those that are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink. By seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone. This can result in separation anxiety. They are more able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected. They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust. They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.

8-12 Years

At this age children's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. An important factor is their deepening realisation of the inevitability of death and an increasing awareness of their own mortality and the fear and insecurity that this can cause. The need to know details continues and may seek answers to very specific questions.

Adolescence

The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving. Death increases anxieties about the future, they may question the meaning of life and experience depression. Teenagers may find it easier to discuss their feelings with a sympathetic friend or adult than close family member. They may be having difficulty coming to terms with their own mortality and that of those close to them and cope by refusing to contemplate the possibility of death by experimenting with risk taking behaviour.

Appendix 3

Support Ideas and Resources

Time out Cards

The pupil is given permission to leave class for a short time when beginning to feel out of control or just to get some 'personal space' when upset. A card is carried in their pocket and the pupil may leave the room without having to ask. It is important that staff are made aware to avoid embarrassing scenes for either the pupil or the teacher. It is essential that the pupil does not just wander around the school but goes to a designated place or person.

Pocket Comforter

A pupil can discretely carry in their pocket a soft piece of fabric or a pebble or stone. Holding onto something solid can help a pupil to remain grounded and in control if upset. Equally, touching a piece of garment that belonged to the dead person can provide a comforting memory.

Secret Diary

This is a way to communicate with a bereaved child who finds it difficult to verbalise feelings. The pupil leaves it somewhere mutually agreed having written or drawn whatever they wish. The teacher responds in the diary and either leaves it to be picked up or discretely returns it to the pupil.

Happy/Sad Faces

The bereaved pupil has a sheet of paper/paper plate with two drawings of faces on either side, one happy, one sad. The pupil shows the side that reflects how they are feeling on a particular day. This gives the teacher an idea of how they are and therefore what approach to use.

I Can....You Can....

A series of four postcards with ideas of how others can help. Titles include TO MY TEACHER...what you can do. A helpful communication tool. Available from The Childhood Bereavement Network Tel: 020 7843 6309

Grief in Children: A Handbook for Adults by A Dyregrov

A short book which looks at children's understanding of death and outlines practical ways in which adults can respond. Good as a general resource for teachers and support staff. Available from Jessica Kingsley Publishers Tel: 020 7833 2307. Cost £12.95

Grief and Bereavement: Understanding Children by A Couldrick

A booklet for adults to help them understand some of the ways children respond to grief. Available from the Child Bereavement Charity, online shop. Cost £3.00

Useful Website

Further support and Information can be found at www.childbereavement.org.uk

Appendix 4

Saying Goodbye

Most schools feel that organising some sort of special assembly or remembrance service after a death in a school community is a helpful thing to do. It can put back a sense of normality into what may have been a very unsettled time. Below are some ideas to help you organise something appropriate.

Why hold a special assembly?

- To bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened.
- To reflect on, and remember, the life of the person who has died.
- To normalise and share grief
- To give the message that it is OK to be sad but equally OK to not be affected
- To inform pupils and staff of any support that is available.

Who should attend?

Anyone who wishes to be there, staff (teaching and non-teaching), pupils and any family members who feel able to do so. In a very large school it may not be possible to get everyone together and a year group assembly might be more appropriate. Many families find comfort in other people organising something special and appreciate being there. Others may not wish to participate but should be given the opportunity to do so.

Who should be involved?

Anyone who wants to. Pupils have produced some very moving assemblies about friends who have died. It helps them to feel involved and gives a sense of doing something positive. Very young children will need greater amounts of adult input but can still participate in a way appropriate for their age and understanding.

How to structure a special assembly

Have a clear beginning, middle and an end. **Begin** by explaining the purpose and length of the assembly. Follow with a brief, factual reminder of the circumstances surrounding the death and when it happened.

The **middle section** could include:

- Lighting a special remembrance candle
- Favourite songs or poems of the person who has died
- Pupils or staff taking it in turns to recount stories or memories
- Photographs of the person or child who has died to give a visual reminder, but remember, a large image can be too much for a grieving family
- Placing objects associated with the dead person into a special memory box. This can then be given to the family
- Talking about a memory tree or collage, previously made from a collection of drawings that pupils have created and stuck onto a large sheet of paper. This can be added to during the assembly.

How to end

This needs some thought and is better if it can leave everyone with a sense of looking forward. Some suggestions include:

- Giving a memory box or memory book to the family
- Blowing out the remembrance candle.
- Going outside to release balloons. These could have a message attached.
- After leaving assembly, pupils who wish to, plant a bulb to create a special memory garden.
- Asking pupils to bring a farewell message to the person who has died to put into a special box as they leave. This can help pupils to personalise a goodbye.
- Reflective but uplifting music helps to create the right atmosphere.

Afterwards

It is best to arrange the assembly before a break. Pupils and staff will need space to reflect before carrying on with the normal school timetable. Some schools time it for the end of lessons but the build up throughout the day can be difficult to handle. If arranged for the end of the school day, leave time for pupils to compose themselves before leaving for home. Be prepared for different responses; some pupils may be deeply affected, others not at all, or react with out-of-character behaviour. Ensure they all know where to go for support if required.

Resources**A Heatbeat Away** by F Lane Fox

A collection of writings, poems and extracts from many sources that chart the journey of the bereaved through grief, rage, anguish through to hope for the future. Available from the Child Bereavement Charity online shop. Cost £10.00 inc post and packing

www.ifishoulddie.co.uk

A website with a link to 'poems and words of comfort' which might give ideas for appropriate texts.