

Supporting pupils who are experiencing grief or loss - Guidance for schools

This guidance has been produced to support schools in the event that one of their pupils suffers a bereavement. In conjunction with this, specific guidance is available for parents and carers and young people. If schools would like to receive more information, they should contact their linked school Educational Psychologist or request advice from Jigsaw4U. Further signposting is also provided at the end of this document.

Common feelings and responses associated with grief:

- Shock and disbelief.
- Sadness and/or feelings of helplessness.
- Worry and anxiety. It is especially common that a child or young person may worry about other family members, displayed by them becoming distressed at separations.
- Difficulties sleeping.
- Vivid memories which are distressing.
- Anger and 'acting out' behaviours.
- Guilt and self-blame.
- Difficulties focusing their attention, especially on demanding tasks like schoolwork.

It is important that parents/carers, as well as children and young people are aware of the range and intensity of the feelings that are often felt as a result of grief. The sense of feeling out of control as they move quickly through a range of emotions is more common in children than adults. If not normalised, this could lead to a young person isolating themselves away from the social support that they need.

A pupil's reaction will be affected by who has died, how they died, what their relationship with the person was, how the family expresses and communicates their grief, what other things are going on at the time and whether their school and home community are supportive. The age and understanding of the pupil will also affect their response, for example:

- 3 to 6-year olds may return to behaviours they had outgrown including; toileting accidents, bed-wetting, separation anxiety or tantrums.
- 7 to 10-year olds may feel sad, angry or afraid. Some may be able to express this, but others will communicate through their behaviour. Children of this age are likely to have questions and want to talk.
- Young people are more likely to have language to describe their feelings but may be feeling more intense emotions that they can't express verbally. This might be displayed through impulsive and risky behaviours, otherwise withdrawing from their peers and activities that they previously enjoyed.

The role of schools:

- Try to make things as normal as possible including sticking to normal routines.
- Promote open communication between school and home and tell parents/carers which member of staff it is best for them to contact, and how.

- Speak to the pupil and suggest support options to them. This would include asking them if there is an adult in school they would like to talk to, or anything else that would help them.
- Provide a safe space where the pupil can go if they are feeling overwhelmed.
- Ensure that class teachers are informed about the pupil's circumstances but check with the young person what information they are happy is shared.
- Even when a child or young person is quite suddenly bereaved, most cope well with their loss. They will need support from those around, but them this is often sufficient.
- It is important for schools who know pupils well to take an approach of 'watchful waiting' in which they monitor the wellbeing and behaviour of a pupil over time. If, after a month or so a pupil is displaying a high level of distress a referral out to a specialist service should be made.
- Signpost and offer support to access other services.

Death in the school community:

- Undertake consultation with the family of the deceased with regards to what information they are happy to be shared with the school community.
- It is helpful to communicate a death from within the school community to parents, as well as commemorating this within school, for instance through an assembly.
- If a death occurs during a period of time when pupils are not in school, it should be considered about how this can be done virtually, for instance via an online assembly.
- Information should also be circulated to parents and carers about how they can support their children.

Things to do and things to avoid when speaking with children and young people:

Things to do

- ✓ Show empathy and reflect back how they may be feeling e.g. sad, angry, worried.
- ✓ Help pupils to have words to describe how they are feeling.
- ✓ Encourage pupils to share how they are feeling with an adult that they trust; in whatever way they feel comfortable.
- ✓ Reassure them that it's ok to ask questions and use clear language in your responses.
- ✓ Help them to reduce any blame they might be putting on themselves.
- ✓ Give them opportunities to remember in school, especially if this is difficult for them to do at home.

Things to avoid

- × Trying to minimise or move away from how a pupil is feeling because you are worried that this will make them feel worse.
- × Oversharing about your personal experiences.
- × Assuming that a young person has it ok because they haven't immediately expressed grief.
- × Use unclear language to try and 'soften' the message which leads to a child not understanding the permanence of what has happened.
- × Speaking to a pupil if you feel that it is too emotionally difficult for you.

Further support:

JIGSAW4U (pre and post bereavement support) <https://www.jigsaw4u.org.uk/>

CHILD BEREAVEMENT UK www.childbereavementuk.org

CRUSE (bereavement care) www.cruse.org.uk

CRUSE materials for Coronavirus: dealing with bereavement and grief

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

WINSTON'S WISH (grieving young people and their families) www.winstonwish.org

