

Supporting a Bereaved Pupil in Primary School

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. By gently introducing death and grief into the classroom, the fear is removed and children will develop coping skills should someone they know die now or in the future.

Contact with home

Having good contact with the family will enable you to access accurate information, to understand what the pupil has been told and to reassure those caring for the child. Remember to share the child's successes as well as any concerns you may have. Grieving children can display altered behaviours in different situations and good communication with home will provide a more realistic picture of how the child is coping.

Acknowledge what has happened

The most helpful thing that you can do for grieving children, is to acknowledge what has happened. Keep it very simple, "I was very sorry to hear that *** has died, that is a very sad thing to have happened." It may be appropriate to send a card; this could be from the class if the child is not attending school for a few days. This will help them to keep up the contact with the school. Be aware that they may not fully understand what being dead means. It is important to address any insecurities and to reassure them. Speak to the pupil about what they might find useful, for example a trusted adult they can speak to, a safe space where they can express their emotions or support with talking to their friends.

Explaining funerals

Most children will only know what a funeral is if they have previously experienced the death of someone they know. You may be asked by a family for advice about taking their child to a funeral and some families are concerned that a funeral is too "adult" a ritual. When someone dies, most people gain some comfort from an opportunity to say goodbye at a funeral. It is no different for children. As long as they have been prepared and given the choice whether to be there or not, they find it a helpful experience. You could reassure them that none of the children and young people that we support at Child Bereavement UK regretted choosing to attend the funeral of someone special to them. Those who were not given the option deeply resent not being included, despite this decision having been made with the best of intentions. Further information on the Child Bereavement UK website <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/how-do-i-explain-a-funeral-to-a-young-child> or our short animated films which explain funerals <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/what-happens-at-a-burial-animation>.

Children need information

Adults naturally want to protect, but children have a much greater capacity to deal with the harsh realities of life than we realise, as long as they are told in an appropriate way. Even a very sad truth will be better than uncertainty and confusion. What a child does not know they tend to make up and their fantasies can be very distressing to them and difficult to deal with. Do not be afraid to use the word "dead." It may feel harsh but euphemisms such as "lost" or "gone away" only create confusion and misunderstanding in children who take what they hear very much at face value.

Grieving behaviour in children

Children, like adults, will grieve in different ways and their responses to a bereavement will depend on their age, understanding and relationship with the person who died. It can be difficult for a bereaved pupil as they may feel different to their peers and may struggle to connect with their friends. Equally, young friends may find it difficult to interact with someone who is bereaved. Nurture these relationships by asking a bereaved pupil what they need and want from their friends and then support these young people as they develop their friendships. Some bereaved pupils feel very isolated and they can benefit from opportunities to meet other bereaved young people.

Children's understanding of death

Children 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. By about the age of 7, the majority of children realise that death is permanent. As they get older, children become aware of the inevitability of death and develop an increasing awareness of their own mortality.

Try to answer questions honestly

Keep the language simple and age appropriate. It is important to find out what has been said to the child at home as it will be confusing if explanations differ. Adults act as a role models so it is helpful if everyone can take the

same approach. Children need an accepting and supportive environment where they feel safe to ask questions and share feelings. When they ask difficult questions which you are unable to answer, ask the child what they think or ask them what they have been told.

Adults as role models

If the adults around them can express their emotions, a child will know it is OK to do the same. Encourage and help them to express feelings by giving opportunities through play and other activities. They may play at being dead and although adults might find this disturbing, it is how children make sense of the world around them. Painting, drawing or craft activities can give a bereaved pupil the opportunity to focus on something practical which may help them to talk about their feelings.

Be prepared to repeat explanations and information

What they understood as a younger child will be different from their present understanding and at various other stages in their development. The meaning and the impact of what has happened will change and deepen. Questions may be repeated in response to their need for more detailed explanations in line with their understanding.

Give reassurance

When someone close to them dies, the world can become a very scary place for a child, and they may start to wonder who else is going to leave them. Children may feel reluctant to be away from their family members or people who are important to them, particularly on school trips or overnight stays. Routines become important to them and they may react to changes within the school environment. Try to prepare them in advance, where possible, and address any anxieties they may have.

Managing bereavement: A guide for schools

This free, downloadable resource is a comprehensive guide which aims to provide education professionals with support and information when a death occurs in the school, or if the school is facing an expected death. It also contains a guide to writing a bereavement policy which reflects the ethos and culture of your own setting.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=4b13d694-2038-4918-90b3-13c06100aafb>

Bereavement Support Training

A Bereavement Support training session will give staff some understanding of the impact of bereavement on children and young people, drawing on both theoretical background and practical interventions. Learning outcomes include a basic understanding of grief theory, improved confidence in addressing bereavement issues and knowledge of practical interventions with those whom are bereaved. These sessions last approximately 1-1.5 hours and are currently facilitated by webinar. To book a free session, please contact Child Bereavement UK.

Training

We provide a wide range of bespoke and core training, consultancy and support services across the UK to help professionals better understand and meet the needs of bereaved children and families. All our training is based on learning from families, is underpinned by relevant theory and evidence-based practice and acknowledges the importance of appropriate communication and support for future wellbeing. For more information please go to: <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/what-we-offer> or email training@childbereavementuk.org.

Talking about death and grief in school

By talking about death and dying as a normal and natural subject, it can enable pupils to be supportive to a bereaved friend, to provide an opportunity for them to ask questions as well as to prepare them for the future. Having honest conversations about death and grief is a resource for schools to help initiate conversations about death and grief with pupils of different ages. <https://honestconversations.lgfl.org.uk/>

The Elephant's Tea Party is a free initiative for schools that raises the topics of death and grief in a sensitive and age-appropriate way. <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/elephants-tea-party>.