

## **Supporting a Bereaved Student in Secondary/High 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 them. Grieving young people can display altered behaviours in different situations and good communication with home will provide a more realistic picture of how the student is coping. Students may find it easier to speak to someone outside of their family, so it can help to provide opportunities for them to connect with trusted adults in school.

### **Acknowledge what has happened**

The most helpful thing that you can do for grieving young people, is to acknowledge what has happened. Keep it very simple, "I was very sorry to hear that \*\*\* has died, it must be very difficult." Some bereaved students worry that they will be made to feel different, so it can help to reassure them that while it is important to let their teachers know, this will not affect how the staff treat them in the classroom.

Speak to the pupil about what they might find useful in school, for example a trusted adult they can speak to, the option to leave a lesson if they are feeling emotional, a safe space where they can express their emotions or support with talking to their friends/peers.

### **Explaining funerals**

Most young people will only know what a funeral is if they have previously experienced the death of someone they know. When someone dies, most people gain some comfort from an opportunity to say goodbye at a funeral. It is no different for young people. 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 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.

### **Young people need information**

Adults naturally want to protect, but young people 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. Do not be afraid to use the word "dead." It may feel harsh but euphemisms such as "lost" or "gone away" may create confusion and misunderstanding for young people, and they often feel strongly about words which seem to 'lessen' the impact of the death.

### **Offer simple choices**

Bereavement combined with the upheaval of youth has been described as a "double jeopardy". A bereaved young person can feel overwhelmed and out of control. By offering simple choices, a school can help a pupil to feel in control of at least one aspect of their life, particularly in relation to how they manage their grief in school.

### **Grieving behaviour in young people**

Young people, 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 student as they may feel different to their peers and may struggle to connect with their friends. Equally, their 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. As they get older, children become aware of the inevitability of death and develop an increasing awareness of their own mortality. Young people may need to revisit

their grief as they grow and mature, and certain times might be particularly difficult, even if the bereavement was a long time ago.

### **Try to answer questions honestly**

Keep the language simple and age appropriate. When they ask difficult questions which you are unable to answer, ask the student what they think or ask them what they have been told. It can be helpful to find out what has been said at home, and be aware that young people may have differing opinions and beliefs to those of their family/carers. Adults act as a role models and young people need an accepting and supportive environment where they feel safe to ask questions and share feelings.

### **Boost self esteem**

Bereaved young people can experience feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-esteem. However, they often have a maturity beyond their years, a greater appreciation of the value of life than their peers and can be less judgemental than others their own age. These are very worthy attributes to highlight to a young person who is struggling to think of themselves in a positive light.

### **Adults as role models**

If the adults around them can express their emotions, a young person will know it is OK to do the same. The young people that we work with at Child Bereavement UK tell us that they prefer support from adults they already know and trust. Taking part in an activity helps a teenager to feel less pressurised into talking. Just being with an adult who they know cares is sometimes enough. When ready, they might start a conversation about what has happened, but don't expect it.

### **Give reassurance**

Teenagers who are grieving can feel completely overwhelmed by powerful feelings and emotions that they do not understand or expect. They may not even know how they are feeling, so adults should not expect them to be able to answer the question, "How are you?" It can be more useful to ask how things are at home, to be flexible with homework deadlines or to offer help to catch up with any work they may have missed.

A bereaved pupil can find the transition between primary school and secondary school particularly difficult. Routines become important to them and they may react to a change in school environment. Young people may feel reluctant to be away from their family members or significant people, particularly on school trips or overnight stays.

Try to prepare them in advance for any changes, 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](mailto: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/>