

St Mary's Bereavement Guidelines and Policy

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Guidelines

This safeguarding bereavement policy is intended to reflect our positive ethos and contribute to the caring community we wish to nurture. It is hoped it will contribute considerably to the emotional health and well-being of our school community.

The main aim of the policy is to ensure that all pupils and all members of staff faced with bereavement are provided with support.

This support includes the opportunity for them

- to express their feelings in a safe environment,
- to be given space and time to come to terms with their loss
- and access to specialist advice if necessary.

It is recognised that the situation for the child, young person and/or family will be monitored over time. It is our hope that anyone faced with bereavement will regard our community as a place where children and young people can grow and face the challenges that lie ahead. This, in turn, will contribute to our learning community.

Therefore, the general aims of these guidelines are:

- For everyone to have a clear understanding of what bereavement means and to be aware of the different stages of bereavement.
- To help children and adults cope with bereavement as well as possible.
- To appreciate that everyone will react differently to bereavement.
- To understand that the breakup of a family through separation or divorce is a traumatic bereavement for a child.
- To have in place a course of action agreed upon by staff and the governing body, which is understood by everyone who comes into contact with the children.

Reactions to grief:

- Open distress
- Tears
- Panic
- Withdrawal
- Aggression
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Refusal to co-operate
- Any other signs of stress / change of mood, which may be expressed in unexpected ways e.g. nervous giggling, stoical bravery, untypical aggression, becoming the class clown, or even total denial.

THESE ARE ALL NORMAL GRIEF REACTIONS

Use of words:

- When talking to a bereaved child about death, the words we use are very important. If death has been referred to as “falling asleep” it is logical for children to become fearful of sleeping or of going to bed. “Loss” implies that something is lost and could be found again.

Please note, research has found that children as young as seven can grasp the concept of never returning.

Do not say to a bereaved child –

- “I know how you feel” – you don’t.
- “You’ll get over it” – they won’t, they will learn that life goes on but that it will be different.

Do say

- I care. I’m here, anytime, anywhere. I will cry with you if need be – I will talk about your mum, dad, Nan etc. and we will laugh about your happy memories.
- I won’t mind how long you grieve for – grieving is so natural and acceptable.

- I don't know how you feel but with sharing perhaps I will learn a little of what you are going through. Perhaps you will feel comfortable talking to me – do you want to give it a try?

Definition of Death:

This may be of use with some children.

Death is a natural part of life. All living things – plants, animals and people, are special parts of the natural world. Nature usually gives us long, healthy lives, but not always. Like all other living things though, people grow old and reach the end of their life. This is called death or dying.

How we can help the child/children with death and grief

Death of an immediate family member:

Being realistic and honest is the best any teacher or adult can do for a child. No child is taken in by pretend cheerfulness. Be aware of and respect the wishes and beliefs of the family.

Encourage children to express their feelings. Do not tell a child how to feel.

Help children use up their feelings in a positive way.

Children learn to mourn by observing others. They need to be warned about different adult reactions and receiving mixed messages.

Emotional pain is catching – be prepared.

Try not to single out a grieving child for special attention. They need to feel part of the class and it helps if you expect them to continue to perform, though obviously at a different level.

Death of a pupil:

Whilst the issues raised will all apply, the following points should also be noted:

Where a pupil has died, the effected class will grieve far longer than the rest of the school.

Those who had a close relationship with the deceased will need extra care.

The child's workspace should be left as it is for a while, and should be referred to.

This allows grief to continue in the hearts and minds of the children. The deceased made a contribution to the class and continues to be part of it because of his/her death.

Death of a member of staff:

Children generally believe that teachers / support staff leave the school for other posts or to retire. For most, it is quite inconceivable that they might die whilst still being employed by the school. We as adults have an inbuilt resistance to accepting death, especially if it is someone of our own age or younger. When such an event occurs it is usually extremely traumatic, especially for members of staff forced to deal with their own grief as well as comforting the children. Planning how we as a school would manage such an event is very important.

Multiple loss in the school:

Where several children and/or staff die in one accident, staff, pupils, parents, governors, outside agencies and the press, all become entwined. Areas of responsibility need to be very clear. It is essential to gather together all of the facts and details of the accident, and then determine the likely impact on the whole school.

This then has to be dealt with appropriately. In the case of multiple deaths, additional support and resources may well be required. Additional staff may also be needed. In such instances, effective communication channels are essential.

Preparing for a pupil to return to school:

For the bereaved child or member of staff, returning to school will be traumatic. It is essential to pave the way for their return. It is important that everyone in school is aware of what has happened. If everybody knows, and the bereaved person is aware of this, then it should make the situation more bearable. It is also important for everyone to be aware so they can appreciate and make allowances for uncharacteristic behaviour. If staff find a pupil in a distressed state, they will at least be prepared in their own minds as how best to deal with it.

School as a safe haven:

Whilst it is only natural to show compassion and allow expression to those suffering grief, it is important not to forget that for the bereaved, school, with its routines and rituals, can provide a respite. Death brings unpredictability, fear and uncertainty.

For the bereaved, family life at this traumatic time can be particularly distressing, routines upset, relationships strained, and the future uncertain.

Ongoing Remembrance:

It is important to remember that anniversaries often spark a revival of feelings associated with the initial bereavement. The family and close friends will remember the deceased person's birthday, as they will the anniversary of the death. Siblings in school will be particularly vulnerable at these difficult times. Staff should be made aware of such dates in order that they may react with the necessary sensitivity and respect.

Children's Understanding and Reactions to Bereavement:

One of the most painful stresses with which a child has to cope is the loss of a parent, a close family member or a friend. Children grieve, they experience pain and sadness but they eventually need to detach their feelings from the deceased just as adults do.

Research shows that children do understand death from an early age. This develops from a belief in the reversibility of death in the pre-school years, to a gradual understanding of death's finality and irreversibility. Children's understanding of death develops alongside their cognitive development; it may occur at different speeds, but the sequence appears to be the same in the majority of children.

Children of junior school age

During this time, children begin to understand the permanence and irreversibility of death. They know the person is gone and will not return. They understand that death means the cessation of all bodily functions and can be as a result of external causes, such as accidents or an inner process such as illness. Although interested in finding out and understanding the real process involved in death, they may still at times use magical thinking. For example, although they know the body of the person has been cremated they may still believe they can converse with the dead person and insist that he/she can see, hear and influence them. Adults in the home can exacerbate this by using the deceased person as a threat or way of controlling a child, especially if they are finding it difficult to discipline them effectively, due to their own grief. This can frighten and add to the child's feeling of guilt and inadequacy, thus preventing them fully accepting both the reality and the emotional impact of their loss.

These children begin to be aware of other's feelings and can show empathy to those also affected by the loss. Sometimes their concern for a remaining parent can prevent them from showing their own grief and they take on an adult pseudo role, which can prevent them from mourning themselves.

Grief Reactions:

Junior school age children may show some of the grief reactions of much younger children, such as bed-wetting. They may also suffer with eating or sleeping problems. They can become irritable and show aggression towards other children and adults, or may simply become clingy and show separation anxiety.

Some of these behaviours can be aggravated by their fear for the physical safety of the remaining family members. This may result in the child not wanting to leave the family home. It is also common for these children to develop psychosomatic illnesses, headaches, sickness and diarrhoea. These problems can disrupt their school attendance, resulting in a fall in academic learning. Due to peer pressure, children may be less able to express their feelings. It is very important for them to appear the same as the others, signalling the message that they are not grieving and therefore do not require support. Unless the process of grieving is completed however, they may have difficulties in developing future relationships, leading to potential emotional and social problems in later life.

Children need both the opportunities to be able to express their grief without fear of being ridiculed by their peers, and the chance to forget at times and get on with their normal daily activities.

A teacher dealing with children of junior school age should remember that many children might have difficulty in being able to verbally express their feelings adequately. It is therefore not uncommon to observe behavioural outbursts, fighting with other children, tantrums or hysterical crying. This tends to happen more at playtime and in situations that are less structured and controlled. This needs to be dealt with in a sensitive but firm way, thus providing both the bereaved and the other pupils with a sense of security in the fairness, consistency and stability of school discipline. Teachers should also be aware that although instinctively they may wish to give special attention to a bereaved child, this can cause resentment among their peers, potentially leaving them more vulnerable.

Self-care for those working with the bereaved:

It's easy to overlook the stresses and anxieties placed on those dealing with the bereaved. In many instances these can be quite exacting and yet because our sympathy and attention naturally rests with those grieving we can easily forget the emotional weight resting on the shoulders of those offering support.

The following points are worth bearing in mind:

- Anticipate possible reactions you may experience with grief and loss. Each one of us is likely to react differently depending on our age, personality, cultural and religious backgrounds. If you are ever unsure about how you should react to others' grief, honesty is always the best line of approach.
- Try to accept that you may experience emotional reactions yourself. Such an event might trigger thoughts of your own past grief experiences. You may find yourself doubting your own abilities. It is not unusual to experience existential thoughts and find yourself querying life's injustices, questioning perhaps your own beliefs.
- Panic attacks and worries about death – your own, or perhaps that of your family – may also become a preoccupation.

- Try to accept that giving such support can affect you in ways perhaps you had not considered. Normally these reactions will subside after a few days or weeks but if they persist do not be afraid to ask for professional support.
- Never take on too much. If you find that you are having difficulty in managing to cope, look to other support – a partner, friend or colleague.

It is important to remember that you alone cannot carry other people's grief.

KEY POINTS FOR SUPPORTING THE BEREAVED

- Offer support, but don't be obtrusive.
- Share grief.
- Allow discussion.
- Allow expression.
- Talk openly but honestly about the person who has died.
- Be aware of other people's beliefs and values.
- Reassure those who feel that they are in some way to blame.
- Be honest with explanations.
- Be compassionate but firm.
- Be prepared to ask for extra help if needed.
- Expect regression.
- Never avoid the bereaved.
- Never pretend life will be the same.
- Never put a time limit on how long you expect the grieving period to last.
- Be honest at all times.

School Policy

The role of the Head teacher/Senior Teacher

In the event of the death of a pupil, a member of staff or a multiple loss within the school, the Head would obviously take control of the situation and ensure that the following points are remembered.

Inform **all** members of staff, including teaching, non-teaching, dinner ladies, kitchen staff, and site manager. If it is felt necessary (possibly because it is the weekend or holiday time) this should be by telephone. Otherwise an immediate staff meeting at the earliest possible time, perhaps with the support of the SMT or Leadership Team.

Arrange a set time, agreed by all staff, for teachers to inform their class what has happened. It is very important to agree on exactly what is to be said.

Make as much TA support as possible to be distributed throughout the school. Time must be allowed for different reactions to be accommodated.

Consider whether absent pupils need to be informed.

Inform governors.

Organise supply cover

Write to parents – should be on the first day. Give the basic facts, as would have been given to the children and alert parents to the possible distress their children will be feeling.

Deal with the media, if necessary. It is imperative that only the Head teacher/Senior teacher performs this role.

Remain in discreet contact with the deceased family, to ensure their wishes are respected.

Keep all staff, ex-members of staff and anyone else closely involved with the school, fully informed of any funeral arrangements / memorial service.

In the immediate future – remember to fully inform any supply staff, students on teaching practice and any parent helpers, of the situation.

Keep all staff up to date with any further information – regular, or if necessary even daily staff meetings may be held.

If need be to contact the school's religious contact member in order that they advise the senior management and to offer support as required

Lead a specially prepared assembly, after the children and staff have all been told.

Arrange for extra pastoral care / counselling, if it is felt necessary.

Be responsible for arranging a memorial service or setting up of a permanent memorial – planting a tree, special award, seat/bench. This will encourage forward thinking.

Procedure to be followed in the event of the death of a current pupil and/or the death of a pupil's immediate family member.

Head teacher to inform class teacher and support staff immediately.

Head teacher to arrange an immediate staff meeting for all teaching and nonteaching staff – **everyone** must be included.

Facts must be made as clear as possible and it should be decided at his meeting, exactly what all the children will be told.

Class to be told as soon as possible, by own class teacher.

Teacher to be responsible for telling any children who are absent.

Rest of school to be told by their own class teacher at an agreed time.

This should be before any breaks or play times, which can be re-arranged if necessary.

Additional procedure to be followed in the event of the death of a member of staff

Head teacher to arrange an immediate staff meeting for all members of staff.

It is vital that everyone is present at this meeting.

An early morning assembly is a good time for this, enlisting the help of the senior teacher.

As above, the facts must be made clear and it should be decided at this meeting exactly what the children are to be told, and when.

Obviously some members of staff will be more distressed than others and some may not be able to return to class immediately. It will be the responsibility of the

Head teacher to make any arrangements to allow the staff some time to themselves, should they need it.

At our school we place value on:

B Bereavement support. Bereaved children are entitled to receive the support they need.

E Expressing feelings and thoughts. Bereaved children should feel comfortable expressing all feelings and thoughts associated with grief, such as anger, sadness, guilt and anxiety and to be helped to find appropriate ways to do this.

R Remembering the person who has died. Bereaved children have a right to remember the person who has died for the rest of their lives if they wish to do so. This may involve re-living memories (both the good and the difficult) so that the person becomes a comfortable part of the child's continuing life story.

E Education and information. Bereaved children are entitled to receive answers to their questions and information that clearly explains what has happened, why it has happened and what will happen next.

A Appropriate and positive response from our school. Bereaved children can benefit from receiving help and understanding from their teachers and peers.

V Voicing important decisions. Bereaved children should be asked if they wish to be involved in important decisions that have an impact on their lives (such as planning the funeral and remembering anniversaries).

E Everyone being involved. Bereaved children should receive support which includes their parent(s) or carers and siblings and which respects each child's confidentiality.

M Meeting others. Bereaved children can benefit from the opportunity to meet other children who have had similar experiences.

E Established routines. Bereaved children should be able to choose to continue previously enjoyed activities and interests.

N No to blame. Bereaved children should be helped to understand they are not responsible and not to blame for the death.

T Telling their story. Bereaved children have a right to tell their story in a variety of ways and for those stories to be heard, read or seen by those important to them.

From Winston's Wish Website

APPENDIX 1

St Mary's will make use of the 'Positive Responses to Supporting Bereaved Children' file, resources and School Support Pathway.

Useful Website for dealing with loss and bereavement in the school community:

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Useful telephone numbers and addresses:

- Winston's Wish Family Line ~ 0845 2030405 – national helpline offering guidance, information and support to anyone caring for a bereaved child, including professionals and family members
- Childhood Bereavement Network ~ 020 7843 6309 – a network of child bereavement services
- Forget-me-not Bereavement Counselling ~ Teesside Hospice Care Foundation. (01642) 296912 or 296913
- CRUSE Bereavement Care (0870) 167 1677 www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

