

Bereavement Policy



Agreed by Governors	Summer 2020
Date for Review	Summer 2023



BEREAVEMENT POLICY

Child Bereavement UK <http://childbereavementuk.org/for-schools/primary-schools/> has an extensive range of information sheets and resources available for Early Years and Primary Schools when supporting a bereaved child. See Appendix 1 for a list of information sheets and resources. Child Bereavement UK's national helpline is open to discuss any questions or issues you may have 0800 02 888 40. They are also available for LiveChat support on their website 9am-5pm, Mon-Fri.

Introduction

Westfield Infant School puts pupils and staff at the heart of the learning process and aims to provide a safe and caring learning environment. The Governing Board believes that bereavement and loss are an inevitable part of learning and growing. No matter how prepared we think we are, death is often traumatic and unexpected. Its unpredictability can severely unbalance a school whose normal working environment is one based on routine. Conversely a situation such as this can bring a school community together in shared grief.

The purpose of this policy is to prepare for a situation that could impact on the whole school and has been constructed to guide us on how to deal professionally sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances. However, much of the information and guidance is relevant to individuals within the school who may suffer a bereavement or loss due to a separation. Further information is available for staff use and suitable books for use with children are stored in the PSHE box of books in the entrance area.

Adults are often reluctant to discuss the subject of death and dying with children. It is of course hoped that young children will not have to encounter death but this cannot be guaranteed and staff in school need to be prepared to offer help, advice and support if such an event should occur. One study found that 92% of young people will experience a 'significant bereavement before the age of 16 years'.

Aims

The aims of this policy are:

- to provide staff with an opportunity to consider the needs of pupils who suffer bereavement or loss
- to enable staff dealing with such a situation to restore the balance of the school environment as soon as possible enabling both pupils and staff to feel supported in a safe and predictable environment
- to promote helpful and compassionate support to bereaved pupils, their families and friends
- to enhance understanding of the differing roles and responsibilities of various agencies who may have contact with bereaved pupils
- to provide proactive, flexible pastoral support to pupils and staff to enable individuals to work through issues relating to bereavement and loss
- to provide clear, planned curriculum opportunities for pupils to understand and explore their feelings.

In a whole school situation, intervention is essential in managing and minimising any disruption. It is also important that staff in school are aware of the support that external organisations can provide.

Procedures

We will always work in partnership with parents/carers and will always listen. We sensitively support and encourage parents/carers and family to tell us of any happenings in their child's life that may affect their child's emotional state but we recognise we will never be told everything.

Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different. Sometimes we will only get to know that someone important to one of our pupils has died because of the depressed emotional state, disturbed behaviour or other signs of distress we have seen and have needed to respond to in the pupil. Sometimes the pupil will confide in a member of staff or a fellow pupil. Sometimes a member or friend of the family will tell us. Sometimes it will be a friend of the pupil.

If there has been a bereavement or significant loss in a family we will seek their help and advice to help us avoid saying anything that could confuse or upset the pupil or add further to the distress of those family members most affected.

If a pupil has not attended school for a period following a bereavement, plans for the pupil to return to school should be agreed and reassurance given that the family will be contacted if the pupil is distressed. It may be desirable to include a visit to the pupil at home by the pupil's class teacher prior to the return. Outside agencies should be contacted if appropriate or if in doubt.

A suitable place in school will be identified for pupils who need some space if too upset to stay in the classroom. Suitable people to whom they can go for support will also be available. Good communication between school and home is paramount.

If the death of a pupil or member of staff occurs, this is likely to cause considerable distress to everyone in the organisation and the following additional actions should be undertaken: Discussions should take place with the family and their wishes taken into account on how and what to tell the school community.

Intervention Team (only usually required if there is a major school incident)

The Intervention Team is a group of individuals ready and willing to work collaboratively in any situation that threatens to disrupt the school's normal working environment.

At Westfield Infant School it has been agreed that the Intervention Team will consist of:

- **Headteacher (Key member):** who will be the first point of contact and will be responsible for allocating specific tasks to individual people
- **Deputy Headteacher:** able to deputise for the Headteacher
- **Lead ELSA / Pastoral Manager:** able to support pupils, families and staff
- **Office Administrator:** who may be required to deal with the media
- **Governor:** who will keep all the other governors informed

The Leadership & Management Team will also be kept fully briefed by the Intervention Team. They will be responsible for sharing information with the rest of the staff as necessary.

Each situation surrounding a death is unique and will be treated as such. However upon hearing the news of a death within the school, members of staff should inform the Headteacher. It is then essential that the facts are established and that the correct information is disseminated to all staff.

As soon as practically possible an announcement should be made to the whole school. Confidentiality is paramount and to avoid rumours it is important to be open and honest whilst avoiding assumptions about the cause of death.

An announcement could be made in a special assembly. Such an announcement should be clear to the point and worded so that it cannot be misinterpreted. At this point staff should be prepared for different emotions and possible outbursts as there is no “normal” reaction to bereavement. It should also be noted that, if a pupil fails to respond to the news, it does not mean that the pupil is not distressed or does not care. Appendix 1 offers a brief summary of a pupil’s possible understanding of death at various ages.

Following the assembly, and preferably in class groups, pupils and staff should be given the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and feelings, expressing their emotions in a secure environment. Not all staff will feel confident in these situations and the Headteacher and other members of the Intervention Team will need to be available to offer support as necessary.

There are staff at Westfield Infant School who have ELSA training and support pupils with mental health and emotional needs. It is important to identify pupils who may be particularly vulnerable or likely to experience PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), for example anyone who has witnessed a death. There may be the requirement to access outside professionals and agencies who can come into the school in the event of a traumatic death to counsel pupils.

The Language of Death

When considering responses to death it is useful to have a few definitions and to ensure that all concerned are using the same language:

- Bereavement is the experience of those left behind after someone has died.
- Loss is used in this guidance as a euphemism for death. Loss can be understood as the state of being deprived of someone that is valued. This may be through circumstances such as family breakdown, or close friends or family moving away. Loss can also include emotionally significant losses such as those caused through disability or the loss of belonging to a place or community. For example, loss can be experienced by asylum seekers.
- Grief is the response of an individual to bereavement or loss. It may be expressed in ways which seem unusual to an observer, and the way in which grief is expressed may alter over time. It is not uncommon for the bereaved to try and hide their grief. The way in which we accept and allow grief is very important.
- Mourning is the process which we go through after bereavement.

It should be noted that all cultures and religions seem to acknowledge that bereavement exists and in most cases the emotions of grief are similar. However, mourning rituals differ widely. Some religions such as Orthodox Judaism hold a funeral service within 24 hours of the death whereas a Christian ceremony can be more than a week later. Hinduism usually involves two ceremonies, one immediately after the death and a second up to a month later. The school should ensure that they do not deny pupils the opportunity to grieve and mourn within the traditions of their own culture and religious beliefs.

According to many researchers, mourning practices are essential in enabling the bereaved to accept and come to terms with death emotionally, cognitively and physically. When dealing with a bereaved pupil it is important not to impose one’s own values. However, that does not mean you can’t listen carefully and talk about what you believe.

It is also strongly recommended that questions are answered factually and euphemisms like “passed away”, “loss” or “lost” are avoided. Whenever possible words like, death, died and dead should be used.

Attendance at a funeral or memorial service will depend on the individual circumstances surrounding the death. Depending on the situation, it is possible that staff and governors may wish

to attend a service. The Headteacher or Deputy Headteacher should be responsible for liaison with the family and should discuss such arrangements and attendance to ensure that the family or relatives are in agreement with any suggestions made by the school.

In the event of large numbers of staff wishing to attend a service, the Headteacher and Chair of Governors will need to discuss the possibility of closing the school. This would occur in exceptional circumstances.

Families will have their own views about whether a pupil should attend a funeral or ceremony of death. Research shows that allowing children to attend such events gives them the opportunity to express their grief, allowing them to accept the reality of their loss, to say goodbye and to allow the grieving process to begin. Without this opportunity they may well feel excluded at a later date and could develop feelings of anger, guilt and resentment.

If parents/carers seek guidance from staff it is acceptable to refer to the information above and offer further details that can be provided by the Headteacher, about organisations able to offer additional advice and support.

Returning to School

Again depending on circumstances, a bereaved pupil or member of staff will eventually need to prepare for returning to school. To help all concerned it is important that the rest of the school are aware of any relevant circumstances. Whilst it is natural for us to show compassion and allow expression, it is also important to remember that for those who have been bereaved, school with its routines and rituals can provide a respite from grief. As previously mentioned, death brings unpredictability, fear and uncertainty. For the bereaved, family life can be strained and uncertain whereas school can provide much needed stability and security. For this reason it is important to be guided by the wishes of those coping with bereavement.

Memorials

The need to ceremonialise death appears to be something that is central to human needs and is shared universally. It is important to respect the recently deceased by carefully considering how they might wish to be remembered and sharing any thoughts and ideas with the family. Again any arrangements for a memorial will depend on the circumstances surrounding the bereavement.

Continued Help and Support

Parents/Carers often feel that teachers are experts on their children. A death in the family will disrupt the family for many months and the whole family may look at school for help and support.

It is important to remember that the family, friends and the immediate community, which will include the school, are often best at supporting those suffering from bereavement. Appendix 3 offers key points for supporting the bereaved.

A member of staff who finds they are supporting families during such circumstances needs to be sensitive and aware of the developmental and emotional needs of the pupil. At the same time it is often helpful for the pupil if changes and disruptions at school are limited, as pupils will benefit from maintaining their normal daily routine and life. It is possible that a bereaved pupil will display changes in behaviour at some stage during the grieving process. Appendix 4 offers suggested problems that may occur at school and a list of things that might help a pupil to cope with the situation.

Self-Care for those Working with the Bereaved

- Try to accept that you may experience emotional reactions yourself. Such an event might trigger thoughts of your own past grief experiences. You may even find yourself doubting your own abilities.
- Try to accept that giving such support can affect you in perhaps ways 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 others to offer support. It is important to remember that you alone cannot carry other peoples' grief.

Local Support

- Leicestershire Psychology Service: Tel: 0116 305 5100
- Leicestershire Healthy Schools: www.leicestershirehealthyschools.org.uk or Tel: 0116 305 3197
- Employee Wellbeing Service: Alison Earl: 0116 3056178
- The Laura Centre (Local charity offering information and counselling for bereaved families, and courses for school staff): www.thelauracentre.org.uk or Tel: 0116 254 4341
- Samaritans (National charity offering confidential emotional support): www.samaritans.org or Tel: 08457 90 90 90
- Governor Development Service - Provides support and advice to school governors : e-mail governors@leics.gov.uk
- Local Faith Groups.

Links with other Policies

This Policy is linked to PSHE and Citizenship, Science and RE. It offers a brief summary to the procedures for dealing with circumstances surrounding bereavement and loss.

Review

This Policy will be reviewed during the Summer Term 2023.

Adopted by the Governing Board and Signed by
Chair of Governors

Date

Information sheets:

- Supporting a bereaved pupil
- Children's understanding of death all ages
- Building resilience in bereaved children
- What helps grieving children and young people
- When someone special dies – under 7
- When someone special dies – 7-11
- When someone special dies – young people leaflet
- When your partner has died: supporting your children
- When a grandparent dies: the impact on children and young people
- Viewing a body with a child
- Explaining funerals, burial and cremation to children
- Young people bereaved by suicide: what hinders, what helps
- Supporting children and young people bereaved by murder or manslaughter
- After the event – supporting children after a frightening event
- Children at school with life limiting illness – guidance for healthcare professionals
- Grieving children and young people: the role of school. Guidance for parents and carers
- Practical ideas to support children and young people in school
- Other useful information sheets

Appendix 2

Children's Understanding of Death

(from: Healthy Schools Leicestershire. Bereavement and Loss: Guidance for Schools)

2-5 Years

Understanding:

- Children tend to perceive death as reversible. Despite being able to tell you that someone is dead, they may still expect them to return, or express concern regarding their whereabouts or wellbeing.
- Children may not have logical thinking, and may engage in 'magical thinking' believing that if they behave in a particular way they could bring the deceased back. This may also lead to children blaming themselves for the death by associating it with things they think they did wrong. In this case it must be made clear to the child that their actions are in no way connected to the death.
- Children's developing language may lead to distress and confusion as they are unable to express themselves.
- Children may also feel unexpressed guilt.
- Understanding is still highly influenced by emotional state of those around them.

Possible Reactions:

- The child may or may not appear anxious. An outward lack of anxiety does not mean that the child is not grieving.
- Children might 'regress' to behaviours from a younger age-such as 'baby-talk', bedwetting, thumb sucking, temper tantrums etc.
- The child may demonstrate confusion or frustration through irritability, anger or protests.
- Children may repeatedly ask the same questions in order to try to make sense of things.
- The child may anxiously hunger for affection and be 'clingy', or suffer increased separation anxiety from carers.
- Some children may escape into play.
- A child may still be expecting the deceased to return.

Providing Support:

- Keep normal routines and structure, as well as familiar objects, people and surroundings as much as possible.
- Listen carefully and help the child in understanding and verbalising the situation and their own feelings.
- Provide opportunities for expression through play, drawing etc.
- Avoid euphemisms such as "Mummy went to sleep." These can be especially confusing for young children.
- Ensure the child does not feel responsible in any way. It may be appropriate to gently correct any 'magical thinking.'
- Be tolerant of regressive behaviours.

5-8 Year Olds

Understanding:

- At the younger end of this stage most children will recognise that being dead is different to being alive, whilst at the older end most children will recognise the permanence of death. At the older end children will usually recognise that death can happen to anyone.
- Children may begin to fear that others they love will also die.
- A child may engage in 'magical thinking', and also may feel guilt for their feelings, or blame themselves in some way.
- Children may wish to gain a greater understanding by asking concrete questions, possibly of an intricate nature regarding what happens to the body etc.
- A child may have misconceptions received from their wider peer group.
- A child may begin to show greater understanding of the feelings of others.

Possible Reactions:

- Many of the reactions seen in younger children may still be evident.
- A child may disguise their own grief or copy coping mechanisms seen in adults who are grieving.

- A child may exhibit separation anxiety and clinginess, possibly leading to school phobia and loss of confidence.
- A child may experience mood swings, and the grief may appear to come and go.
- A child may find forming relationships harder.
- Some children show increased aggression or angry outbursts.
- There may be illnesses such as headaches, stomach aches, nausea etc. caused by anxiety (psychosomatic.)

Providing Support:

- Much of the support from younger stages still applies.
- Be tolerant of erratic behaviour whilst still providing secure boundaries.
- Provide factual and age appropriate information.
- Ensure the child is able to ask questions and grieve openly. Avoid encouragement to 'be strong', as suppressing the natural responses may cause problems later.
- Share age appropriate books that tackle the subject of death and bereavement.
- With parental consent, consider group discussion/circle time etc.
- Appoint a member of staff close to the pupil to listen to them, provide help and keep a watchful eye for incidents such as bullying.
- Offer opportunities for acts of remembrance in both the short and long term.
- Provide a safe-place to which the child can retreat for time alone or one to one care.

8 – 12 years

Understanding:

- **Builds on the understanding from the 5-8 stage.**
- Children increasingly understand the inevitability of death, potentially increasing anxiety for others.
- Empathy with others who are bereaved begins to increase.
- Children may take on 'adult' roles in supporting others, which may prevent them from allowing themselves to mourn fully.
- Increasing desire to know details about death and funeral arrangements etc.
- Becoming aware of own mortality.
- Increasingly aware of how their world will be changed as a result of the bereavement.
- May experience anger and feelings of guilt.

Possible Reactions:

- **Many of the reactions seen in younger children may still be evident.**
- Some children may be reticent to express the emotions they are feeling.
- A child may become fearful regarding their own health or that of others.
- A child may exhibit challenging behaviour. This will need to be handled sympathetically, through stability and consistency of boundaries should be maintained to aid a feeling of security.
- A child may develop psychosomatic illnesses such as sickness or headaches, resulting in more erratic school attendance.
- Bereavement may affect progress at school, and lead to under performance in work and exams.

Providing Support:

- **Much of the support from the previous stage still applies.**
- Encourage the child to feel they can talk about their experiences.
- Provide a range of alternative ways for the child to express themselves, such as writing, drawing, dance, role-play, etc.
- Be open and honest, and don't be afraid to tell the child if you don't have an answer.
- Avoid statements such as 'Be strong', or 'Dry your eyes' which imply the grief reaction should be held back.
- Provide fun opportunities for the child to take a break from grieving, and ensure they know it is OK to relax.
- Maintain consistent and fair expectations, whilst also allowing for more erratic behaviour.

Key Points for Supporting a bereaved pupil

We are often at a loss to know what to say to a child or young person who has been bereaved and what we can do to help them. The following are brief guidelines on how to offer support.

- Check out the facts and familiarise yourself with the circumstances surrounding the death. Communicate with the family and make sure that what you say will not conflict with the family's wishes.
- Acknowledge what has happened and do not be afraid to use the word dead: "I was very sorry to hear of the death of your..." If you find words difficult you can say a lot with just a touch.
- Children and young people need honesty. Although sometimes difficult, it is better to answer awkward questions truthfully.
- Be prepared to listen, again and again and again.
- Allow them to express emotion and feelings and do not be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness.
- Do talk about the dead person and share any memories. The bereaved child may well need to do this. Ignoring the dead person is a denial that they ever existed.
- Recognise the full tragedy. Do not try to comfort with comments such as "at least it is not as bad as..." You might think this is helpful, it is not.
- Reassure them that they are not responsible. It is very common for children and young people to feel that in some way they caused the death.
- Give bereaved pupils time. It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school work. Remember that they will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them.
- Don't assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care. Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity.
- Try not to judge. Grief is a very personal experience, every child and young person will do it their way.

Problems Which May Occur at School

- Behaviour changes
- Lack of concentration
- Increased aggression
- Isolation, withdrawal
- Overall performance suffers
- May seem stressed by little events
- May not want to go to school because of fear of what may happen while not at home
- If a child has seen a parent/carer very distressed they might not want to leave them at home alone
- It may be that a parent/carer does not want the child to go to school because they do not want to be left alone

What Might Help?

- Keep to a routine as much as possible
- If you create a new routine try to stick to it
- Do not pretend that everything is normal. Allow the child to express fears and talk.....
- Be honest at all times
- Do not tell them not to cry
- Do not let the dead person be put on a pedestal.
- Do not set a time limit on grieving. Each person, adult or child will grieve in their own way and in their own time
- Do explain what happens at a funeral/cremation
- Do expect regression
- Keep the school informed at all times about how the child is coping
- Do listen
- Do share your hurt with the child. It is all right to cry in front of a child
- Show lots of love and understanding
- Find someone who is not part of the family for the child to speak to
- Soon after the death make a scrap book about the person who has died. Put in drawings and photos, stories about the death and how it happened, stories about things that you did with the dead person
- Make a 'keepsake box'. Put things in it to keep in memory of the person who has died