

St Luke's School

Bereavement Policy



Ratified by St Lukes School Governing Body

Rationale

This policy has been prepared for school staff that are faced with an individual or group of bereaved children. It is not designed to make anyone into specialist grief counsellors but tries to address the very practical questions that are likely to face a member of staff in this situation. Children are all different and they will all react to bereavement in their own very unique way. The difference on their levels of awareness, understanding, age, emotional maturity, security and not least, their relationship with the deceased, will have significant effects.

Background

The trauma of bereavement can have the effect of throwing a school in at the deep end. Most meet such situations as they arise, without giving much prior thought to the response that will be needed. It makes sense to take time to put even loose contingency plans into place by reflection on how the school could or should respond in a tragic situation – St Luke's has addressed procedures within the School Incident Management Plan.

In common with other Personal Social Development work already done in schools, bereavement issues should be approached several times in the course of primary education, each time building on what has been introduced before.

Common reactions in adults and children

Adults and children can respond in broadly similar ways to grief and bereavement. Reactions will depend on the nature of the incident, their degree of involvement with it and their own personality and coping skills. Behavioural or physical symptoms include:

- Increased misbehaviour and acting younger
- Pretend play and acting out the traumatic incident
- Sleep disturbance including fear of the dark or of being alone
- Clinging behaviour with parent(s)/carer(s)
- Preoccupation with the traumatic event
- Difficulty concentrating in school/memory difficulties
- Heightened alertness to danger including sensitivity to loud noises and generally
- Changes in appetite
- Fears for their safety or for that of family and friends
- Reluctance to talk
- Tearfulness
- Tiredness
- Reluctance to come to school

For both children and adults it is their naturally available communities (family, friends and colleagues) who will provide the most appropriate and potential sources of help and support. External sources of support should be sensitive to the needs of these natural communities and should seek to augment, validate and reassure these to enhance rather than detract from their effectiveness.

Features

- If a child feels secure with a particular staff member, it is likely that they will come to that staff member specifically for comfort or enlightenment and it is important that the staff member has given some thought as to how he/she should respond. Children often see things in terms of black and white. The result is that their questions may be disconcertingly blunt and the staff member may find himself/herself upset by the form of the question, or the inability to answer it.
- A natural instinct may be to protect a child from the magnitude of his or her loss. It is probably wiser for the member of staff to present reality as it is.
- The child/ren should be told as soon as possible that a person has died to prevent him/her learning from some other and often inappropriate source. The staff member should use a normal tone of voice and clear direct language and avoid hushed whispers which may convey unnatural and strange feelings
- Whenever possible, children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where the child will feel more secure
- However, it is important to have a nominated person, who has undertaken training, in charge. It is still best depending on the size of the school that this person is acquainted with all the children in the school.
- It is important to tell the truth as far as you know it. Even white lies will have to be renegotiated later. Children will vary in their ability at any one time to take in particular explanations. If the information is limited, the member of staff should tell what he/she knows and then make every effort to find out more.
- It is very important to let children know that it is natural and acceptable for adults and children to be upset and cry. It is better to share feelings rather than to deny them. Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from the extreme grief reactions and adults who are enveloped with grief may need some time and space initially to release their most extreme reactions.
- The staff member should encourage the child to ask questions and should tailor answers to the child's level of understanding, within his/her home religion or culture and your own belief system.
- It is important that staff members/adults don't force children to behave in a prescribed manner. Some children may have been brought up not to show their emotions. Others may repress grief as they see crying as a weakness which means they will lose face in front of their friends. These inappropriate coping strategies can only work for a while and often leave some children out of sync with their peers i.e. appearing in control when all the others are upset and later cracking up with grief and guilt when all the others have come to terms with the loss.
- There are several phases of grief. The initial stage of disbelief usually passes quickly, but many individuals are in this stage for some considerable time. The feelings of depression have to be passed through, before the individual can begin again to look positively. This makes it particularly difficult when several children are going through the grieving process (e.g. class reacting to the death of one of their peers) as they will all be at different stages at the same time and it should be allowed to run its course.
- Very young children (under 5 years) are beginning to develop their independence from the security of the home and the loss can be particularly damaging to them. They may also express their disturbance in indirect ways (e.g. bedwetting, nightmares) and should be reassured and comforted. Other very vulnerable children are those from already insecure backgrounds i.e. broken families, marital instability etc, and these children may have severe reactions to the new loss. All children can come to terms with the loss and the aim is to provide support and comfort so that the trauma is gradually overcome, rather than remain a permanent block to their emotional development.
- Traumatic Death. Children who have witnessed a dramatic death or deaths, or been involved in disaster, or other trauma, may need specialised treatment. Parents/carers and school staff may too need help. These experiences are often too shocking and disruptive to be absorbed and worked through over time.

The Overall Message in Helping Bereaved Children

- Try to maintain feelings of security, of being cared for, of being loved
- Maintain all the necessary practical care
- Maintain boundaries where possible
- Be honest at the child's level of understanding
- Continue to talk and communicate
- Make use of a whole support network
- Know when to admit to senior staff that you can't cope at any particular time
- Recognise the need for support for staff

Other Crises

There are other crises which can have an effect on pupils. Many people tend to associate bereavement with a permanent deprivation of a loved one through a death. However, it is worthwhile remembering that for many children there are other losses which may be experienced as though it were bereavement. The emotional and behavioural outcomes can be similar to those in the bereavement process. Examples could include the following:

- Divorce
- Death of a pet
- Parents/carers in prison
- Disabled or seriously ill sibling
- Parent/carer returning to paid employment
- Parents/carers changing jobs
- Changing schools
- Violence/Sexual Harassment
- Drug Problems
- Hospital Stay
- Children in Care
- Relocation

These situations may not affect the whole of the class but it can to a large extent affect individual pupil performance in class. It would be very demanding to create a specific contingency plan for each situation but in general the initial response to an upset child should be, as is normally the case, to identify the source of distress, the child's response and the support required with the assistance of various specialists: educational psychologists, school health visitor, external sources. The normal referral routes should apply but in general, consideration should be given to the following:

- What support can the child expect at home?
- What can school staff do?
- Does the situation demand the involvement of the whole class?
- Can a meeting with the parent(s)/carer(s) be helpful?
- Has the pupil close supportive friends?
- Should external agencies be contacted?

Procedures

When the death occurs outside of school (e.g. illness, accident, suicide, murder)

An immediate action plan will include:

- The development of routines which ensure that the headteacher is informed by parent(s)/carer(s) or other authorities (police, hospital)
- The headteacher verifies information about the child's death before informing staff and classmates. The headteacher gathers as many facts as possible about the event from parents/carers and others (police, fire brigade, hospital)
- Information should be gathered i) where, when and how it happened? ii) were other pupils present? iii) where is the child now?

- The headteacher takes responsibility, with permission from next of kin, for sharing information with other staff members and other pupils
- Plan for the rest of the day is activated to include support in the classroom
- If Press approach, they should be referred to the headteacher.
- A meeting should be held to discuss plans for the following day. All staff members/staff in classes affected by the death should attend.

A Pupil's Parent/Carer or Sibling Dies

Before notifying fellow pupils, the designated staff member should speak with the bereaved child and other family members to determine what information should be given to his/her classmates and in what form. Some children prefer to be absent while this information is given, some want to participate. It is helpful if classmates are informed about how their classmate wants to talk about what has happened (i.e. speak openly and take the initiative, or let the bereaved child decide when he/she wants to talk).

It is a symbolic gesture to the bereaved child and the family if a representative of the school, is present at the funeral. The staff member can also speak to the child's closest friends about the funeral. It will be important for staff to note important dates i.e. anniversary of the death and dates that may be poignant to the child.

Following the death of a parent/carer, the staff must accept a longer period with a reduced capacity for school work. Because of this, the bereaved child might need extra help at a later time, when working capacity becomes normal again. Let the child decide how much he/she wants to talk about what has happened, but let the child know that you are willing to listen if he/she wishes.

The Death of a Member of Staff

- If the death happens suddenly and unexpectedly, arrange for a meeting where colleagues can talk through what has happened.
- Try to establish continuity in the classroom as soon as possible. The supply staff member or member of staff should be informed properly on how pupils and other staff were affected and which ones were most distressed. This member of staff will require support.
- In the case of the classtaff member, if appropriate let some of the children participate in the funeral, accompanied by trusted adults.