

Bereavement Policy



Mepal & Witcham Primary School
a part of Ely Diocese Multi Academy Trust

Approved by Trustees on:	April 2020
To be reviewed:	April 2023

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Rationale

Every 22 minutes in the UK a parent of dependent children dies, leaving about 41,000 bereaved children each year. Many more are bereaved of a grandparent, sibling, friend or other significant person, and, sadly, around 12,000 children die in the UK each year. Within our school community there will almost always be some recently bereaved children or members of staff who are struggling with their own situation – or sometimes the entire school community is impacted by the death of a member of staff or a pupil. We would hope to not encounter such circumstances, but the statistical inevitability of such an occurrence implies the necessity of having a Bereavement Policy in place in order that we might be proactive, rather than reactive, when responding to these sensitive situations. Empathic understanding in the familiar and secure surroundings of school may be all the bereavement support some children, or staff, require, though referral to more specialist support should be a consideration where the impact of grief is more complex.

This policy will provide guidelines to be followed after a bereavement. The aim is to be supportive to both pupils and adults, and for staff to have greater confidence and be better equipped to cope when bereavement happens. Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different and this policy has been constructed to guide us on how to deal professionally, sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.

This school and Trust, to which it belongs, are committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils. We wish to work towards this in all aspects of school life, and to provide an ethos, environment and curriculum that support and prepare pupils for coping with separation or loss of a loved one, either through death or divorce.

Objectives

The core intentions of the policy are:

- To support pupils and/or staff before (where applicable), during, and after bereavement
- To enhance effective communication and clarify the pathway of support between school, family and the community
- To identify key staff within school, the Trust, and LA, and clarify the pathway of support
- The Children Act 1989 aimed to ensure that the welfare of the child was paramount, working in partnership with parents to protect the child from harm (http://www.careandthelaw.org.uk/eng/b_section2). All intentions of this policy endorse the aim that we endeavour to counter any adverse effects of bereavement and maintain pupils' and staff emotional well-being.

The role of the Trust

- For Trustees to ratify this policy, ensure its implementation and review in three years
- To advise and support staff
- Consult on counselling and support referral pathways and identification of complex grief
- To provide access to staff support, which may include Employee Assistance Schemes, to support staff well-being
- To liaise with the headteacher to co-ordinate media enquiries

The role of the governing body

- To monitor and support the implementation of this policy
- To offer support and guidance to the headteacher

The role of the head teacher

- To monitor progress and liaise with external agencies
- To be the first point of contact for the child or children, family and staff concerned
- To keep the Trust and governing body fully informed

The role of the Local Authority

- To provide statutory 'critical & major incident' support if appropriate

Diane Stygal, Senior Leadership Adviser: 01223 507115 & 07585 881934

Cambridgeshire County Council: General Enquiries 0345 045 5200 (8am to 6pm Monday to Friday)

Educational Psychology Team: 01223 699 859 / 01223 699945

The role of pastoral staff (i.e. church staff, spiritual advisors, school counsellors, mentors etc.)

- To have bereavement support training and cascade learning to other staff. This will be provided through trained staff within school and the school link with Acorn project.

Procedures

When a death of a pupil or member of staff occurs parents or other family members usually let the school know directly. Other agencies outside of the school, such as the police or social care, may sometimes inform schools that a death has occurred. The person answering the phone will put them through to the most senior member of staff on site.

Where death occurs in the holidays or at weekends the parents may contact whoever they can – they may have the phone number of a member of staff who is known to them outside of school.

In that instance, the member of staff who takes the call will immediately contact the most senior member of the school team possible and that person will then assume responsibility for the dissemination of the information.

Upon receiving news that a death has occurred

When you first hear the news that someone in the school community has died, the situation may feel fairly chaotic, so it is important to understand that there is no set way of responding. You know your school and its uniqueness, but this procedure will give you guidance on things that are important to consider.

It is likely that you will be feeling shocked yourself so give yourself time to process the information you have received.

1. Contact with the deceased's family should be established by the (Executive) Headteacher and their wishes respected in communicating with others. Factual information is essential to avoid rumour and confusion, whilst being sensitive to cultural and religious considerations.
2. Contact should be made with the Trust Director of Inclusive Leadership, Amy Weaver 07986 949508 or the Trust Chief Executive Officer, Adrian Ball, and the Chair of Governors. Identify a team in school that can help you.
3. Identify any vulnerable staff members or pupils, including any absentees or part-time staff. Staff should be informed before pupils and be prepared (through prior training) to share information in age-appropriate ways, as agreed for each individual circumstance.
4. Pupils who are affected should be informed, preferably in small groups, by someone familiar.
5. A letter to all school families affected should be composed at the earliest opportunity and a decision made as to whom, and how, it should be distributed, in consultation with the Trust's Director of Communication, Jacqueline McCamphill, 07376 668693.
6. The school should be aware that the school timetable may need a degree of flexibility to accommodate the needs and wellbeing of children affected by the situation. However, minimal disruption to the timetable also offers a sense of security and familiarity.
7. Staff affected by the death will be offered ongoing support as appropriate. The Diocese of Ely Multi-Academy Trust can provide details of external, confidential support ranging from occupational health and counselling as well as signposting to assistance programmes that provide support and advise on financial and legal matters. Please contact the Trust HR team on 01353 656760 for details.
8. In consultation with the bereaved family, arrangements for funeral attendance may be clarified, with the consideration of partial school closure or timetable adaptation in exceptional circumstances (usually in the case of the death of a staff member when significant numbers of staff may wish to attend their funeral or death of a child in school). Cultural and religious implications need consideration.
9. Some deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, attract media attention. All members of staff are advised not to respond to journalists and to refer all enquiries to the Headteacher, and where necessary a press statement should be prepared by the Headteacher – in consultation with the Trust's Director of Communication.
10. Ensure any automated or pre-planned communications from school, such as school reports, are checked or omitted to ensure sensitivity to the bereaved family and/or staff.
11. In consultation with the bereaved family and Trust, consider plans for a fitting memorial or celebration of their loved one's life.

It may be appropriate to hold a memory assembly for the child or member of staff. Staff need to be able to show pupils that it is perfectly normal to feel upset at the loss of a friend and that helpful rituals, prayers, and remembering can be shared in a manageable way together.

12. School should be aware that the impact of bereavement follows a child throughout their school life, so information should be recorded sensitively and shared with relevant people, particularly at transition points. Guidance should be provided to staff to raise awareness of interacting with and monitoring the needs of a bereaved child (See **Appendix Three**)

Following a Bereavement:

We believe that children and adults alike have the right to:

- be given space and time to grieve.
- be given support from whichever source is deemed the most appropriate – if possible, of their own choice.
- encounter a caring environment in which they feel safe to demonstrate grief without fear of judgement.

We recognise that:

- grief may not always be apparent to the onlooker, but its invisibility makes it no less real.
- differing religions/cultures view death and bereavement from different perspectives and all viewpoints should be taken into consideration and given equal value in the school environment.
- the death of a child has huge repercussions beyond the immediate teaching/care team of that child and every effort should be taken to inform and deal sensitively with the far-reaching contacts.
- some pupils or staff who may not be 'directly related' to the pupil or member of staff who has died, may be significantly impacted, and may also require support.

On-Going Support

For Staff:

Following bereavement, it is only to be expected that some members of staff will be emotionally affected and would benefit from the provision of some time for reflection. The following support may be helpful:

- A specific room could be allocated- e.g. the Meeting Room - for the duration of a lunchtime to enable staff to meet and share their thoughts over a coffee or tea. It should be emphasised that anything shared on such occasions should be held as confidential and not for public airing.
- Access to one to one time with a member of staff who is trained in bereavement support.
- The Trust HR team can ensure staff access counselling support and staff will be reminded about this service. Availability of information about accessing bereavement support outside of school, e.g. CRUSE.

For Pupils:

Experience in many schools has shown that most pupils can be supported by the school staff.

- In most cases, each child will have a favoured member of staff to approach.
- The PSHE co-ordinator or nominated member of staff will ensure that the school has suitable books and other materials to help children discuss death and come to terms with loss. The school can access a range of books and resources from the Trust Inclusion & Safeguarding Team.
- Social Stories may be one way to help pupils to understand loss.
- The Trust Inclusion & Safeguarding Team can offer support, advice and training to support pupils in school.
- The school can refer or signpost to external agencies and charities to support pupils who may need more help.

For the Family:

- Communicate with the family straight away and offer support. Send a letter of condolence from the school.
- Give parents and/or family members the opportunity to collect any personal belongings of the person who has died.
- Send a representative to the funeral.
- Hold a collection/flowers to be sent as appropriate.
- Invite parents/family to any commemorative events held by the school, both at the time and in subsequent years.
- If memorial work has been completed, for example a remembrance wall or book, then this should be returned to the parents at an appropriate time, and pupils informed where it has gone.

Parents will be told that they are welcome in the school and will be encouraged to come and visit, as this can be helpful in their grieving.

The first visit to the school is often difficult and will be arranged sensitively in accordance with the parents' wishes. It will then be for the parents to decide if they wish to maintain on going links. Each family will be different, with differing needs. Therefore, the school will always be there to act as a source of support and information.

Appendix One

Suggested templates for letter to parents:

Before sending a letter home to parents about the death of a pupil, permission must be gained from the child's parents.

The contents of the letter and the distribution list must be agreed by the parents and school, in consultation with the Trust's Director of Communication.

Sample letter on death of a pupil:

Dear Parents

Your child's class teacher/form tutor/had the sad task of informing the children of the death of <Name>, a pupil in <Year>.

<Name> died from an illness called <name of illness, such as cancer>. As you may be aware, many children who have cancer get better but sadly <Name> had been ill for a long time and died peacefully at home yesterday.

He/She was a very popular member of the class and will be missed by everyone who knew him/her.

When someone dies it is normal for their friends and family to experience lots of different feelings like sadness, anger and confusion. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try to answer their questions at school but if there is anything more that you or your child needs to know, please do not hesitate to ring the school office and we would be more than happy to help you.

We will be arranging a memorial service in the school in the next few months as a means of celebrating <Name... 's> life.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

Sample letter to bereaved parents:

Dear ,

We are so very sorry to hear of [name]'s death. There are no words to express the sadness of losing a child and we can only begin to imagine the anguish you must be going through.

Clearly, as a school community, we will miss him/her very much and we are doing our best to offer comfort and support to his friends and classmates. He/she was a much-loved member of our school family.

If we can do anything to help as you plan [name]'s funeral service or other memorial opportunities, please let us know. In time, we will also ensure that anything of [name]'s that remains in school is returned to you, with your agreement, including photographs we may have on the school system.

Please be assured that you are in our thoughts at this very sad time and do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of support in any way.

With deepest sympathy,

Headteacher

Sample letter on death of a staff member:

Dear Parents,

I am sorry to have to tell you that a much-loved member of our staff [name] has died. The children were told today and many will have been quite distressed at the news. No-one wants to see children sad, but we are very aware that factual information and emotional support are the best means of helping children deal with bereavement.

I am sure there will be many parents who are also saddened by the news. Children respond in different ways so may dip in and out of sadness, and questions, whilst alternately playing or participating in their usual activities. This is normal and healthy. You may find your child has questions to ask which we will answer in an age appropriate way in school, but if you feel you would like more support and advice yourself, please do not hesitate to contact the school office.

You may also find some very useful advice and resources online at www.childbereavement.org.uk

We will share details of the funeral as soon as they are known. Children who wish to attend will be welcome to do so, though it will not be compulsory.

I am sorry to be the bearer of sad news, but I appreciate an occurrence like this impacts the whole school community. I am so grateful for the thriving partnership we have with parents and trust that we, together, will be able to guide and support the children through what may be, for many, a very new experience in their lives.

Yours.....

Headteacher

Appendix Two

Supporting Bereaved Children

Key points to remember after a death:

- many children want to share their story
- telling their story is a healing experience
- children also need continuity (normal activities), care (plenty of hugs and cuddles) and connection (to still feel connected to the parent who has died, and to you)

What do bereaved children need?

After a death, many children want to share their story. They may want to tell you what happened, where they were when they were told about the death, and what it was like for them. Telling their story is a healing experience. One of the best ways adults can help young grievors is to listen to their stories.

Specifically, they need:

- adequate information about the death
- their fears and anxieties addressed
- reassurance that they are not to blame
- careful listening
- acknowledgement and acceptance of their feelings and grief
- a sense of safety in the world
- respect for their own way of coping
- people who will guide and help
- help with overwhelming emotions
- involvement and inclusion in rituals and anniversaries
- opportunities to remember the person who has died

Three important questions young children might not ask but you might help to answer:

- who will look after me?
- will I get sick?
- did I cause my parent to die?

The death of a parent can shake the foundations of a child's belief in the world as a safe place. A child will need plenty of reassurance and encouragement to begin to feel safe again. Some children may worry about getting sick and dying themselves and it may reassure them to visit their family doctor for a check-up. It's a good idea for their parent to give the doctor a ring before the visit so that they can be prepared for any questions the child may ask.

Communicating with a Grieving Child

Children may not necessarily wish to talk but they need to be able to express their grief and sadness. Below are some practical suggestions to help you with this.

How you can help children explore and express their grief?

- Talk
- Talk about the person who has died and use their name.
- Make a memory box
- Make a photo album and journal
- Put together questions that build a portrait of the parent
- Make time to sit down and listen
- A child will talk when they are ready and usually in small bursts. These are precious windows to the child's understanding of what has happened.

The following are signs that a child may need help either in school or from external professionals. Many of these signs are normal following the death of a parent but may indicate a problem if they continue for a long time and don't seem likely to change.

- Difficulty talking.
- Has continuing difficulty talking about their parent who has died.
- Aggression.
- Is displaying aggressive behaviour and anger.
- Physical symptoms.
- Has unexplained physical symptoms and discomfort such as stomach aches and headaches.
- Sleeping and eating problems.
- Has sleeping difficulties and eating disturbance such as eating excessively or having very little appetite.
- Marked social withdrawal.
- Doesn't want to socialise with friends or others outside the family.
- School difficulties.
- Has serious academic reversal, inability to concentrate or behavioural problems.
- Guilt.
- Has continuing blame or guilt.
- Self-destructive behaviour.
- Engages in at-risk behaviour and talks about wanting to hurt themselves.

What might young people be feeling and thinking?

Age related concepts

It may help to know that when something bad happens children/young people often:

- Avoid feelings
- Push their feelings away
- Hide their feelings
- Disguise their feelings
- Deny their feelings
- Cover their feelings

There can be a stereotypical view of how the different genders react to grief; i.e. boys get angry and girls internalise their feelings. However, boys may internalise their feelings and girls could get angry rather than the other way around. Whilst this text contains generalised statements that may be helpful, it cannot be stressed enough that reactions are individual.

These examples are for the chronological age of the child. Consideration should also be given to children with special educational needs. Their ability to understand and communicate their feelings varies enormously and suitable language should always be used to avoid misunderstandings.

Children under 2 years old

Very young children and babies are not able to understand death. If a death occurs in the life of a child of this age, they will experience the loss as separation from someone they have an attachment to. The child may notice the effect on the family, but their expression of the experience may be later in life.

Young People, Schools and Issues of Bereavement © Gloucestershire Children and Young People's Services

Children aged 2-5

This age group possess what is described as magical thinking and believe that death is reversible. They can be convinced that it is something they did or said that has caused the person to die so conversely by behaving or saying other things they will be able to bring the dead person back to life.

Explanations need to be concrete; children need facts in a literal way not euphemisms e.g. not that someone has gone away or gone to sleep but that they have died.

Young children may revert to earlier forms of behaviour such as bed-wetting sucking their thumb or using of a security blanket; they may have tantrums or dreams and nightmares.

This age group may need constant reassurance that the death was not their fault and repeat of explanations as they can tend to ask the same questions many times in order to help gain an understanding of what has happened.

Being read books about death, drawing and play gives opportunities to identify and talk about worries and help deal with bereavement. It should be noted that any of these activities could help any aged child. Again, remember that they may not react as we expect.

Children aged 6-9

At this age the child will generally begin to understand the finality of death and how it applies to all living things but may still be confused about it. Children may be more open to discussion but may have what adults feel is an unhealthy curiosity about dead bodies. This can become a total pre-occupation and a black humour develops. For that individual this may be a completely natural reaction. Their curiosity is normal, and they will benefit from clear explanations. Dreams and nightmares again are common at this age and they may feel frightened of the spirits they link to death.

Like the younger child they may revert to previous patterns of behaviour and will require reassurance and secure routines that may make change difficult to negotiate.

Children are more likely at this age to complain of somatic symptoms such as headaches and tummy aches or just generally not feeling well. This may be to not go to school but stay where it is safe. This relates to the child's perception and of course is one of the outcomes for children; we need to ensure that school feels a safe place to be.

Children aged 9-13

In this age range children understand death as irreversible and have an awareness of how the death impacts upon them both now and in the future. There may be expectations either from themselves or others that they need to be 'grown-up' or to be supportive of others, which along with the awareness of other people's feelings may make it difficult for them to express their own feelings. Their feeling that 'normal' friends will not want to hear their worries and grief also creates this. As they are at a stage of moving away from dependence and forming important relationships outside the family bereavement at this point can destabilise them. They may experience mood swings and big emotional releases such as anger and distress, which can be scary both for the individual and their carers.

Adolescents

At this time in their life young people are developing their ideas of who they are, and peers and friends are increasingly important. Their bodies are changing, and new possibilities are made available. Risk taking behaviour is more likely at this time as they test the boundaries. The death of someone close may make the young person reflect on the meaning of life and s/he may question why planning for the future has any importance.

Being busy on different activities and not stopping to reflect can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they fear losing control.

If over a prolonged period of time a teenager withdraws, acts in a matter of fact, detached or angry way, there may all be reasons to be concerned. They will need to be reassured that they have love and support and although the limits that are usually set still apply, someone is available to listen if needed.

Appendix Three

Useful Online Resources & Information

Child Bereavement UK offers a wealth of resources and guidance from the early stages of a bereavement ongoing for young people, families and schools:

<https://childbereavementuk.org/>

Child Bereavement UK's School's Information Pack can be downloaded here:

https://childbereavementuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SALL0012_17_01-Schools-Information-Pack-with-cover.pdf



Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse is a national charity that provides advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever or however the death occurred. The service is provided by trained, experienced volunteers, and is confidential and free.

Cruse provides face-to-face, telephone, email and website support both post- and pre-bereavement. It has a national helpline, and local services throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

It offers:

- someone to talk to face-to-face, or on the telephone
- online support
- groups – some bereaved people find it helpful to talk to others in similar circumstances
- information – about many aspects of bereavement and other sources of help and support
- face-to-face, telephone helpline and online support for children and young people.

For help and support and for details of your local Cruse service:

- email at helpline@cruse.org.uk

Children and young people can:

- telephone our young people's freephone helpline on 0808 808 1677

Has someone died?

Visit www.cruse.org.uk Telephone the national freephone helpline on 0808 808 1677 and the Hope Again, designed by and for young people, at www.hopeagain.org.uk or email hopeagain@cruse.org.uk

www.winstonswish.org.uk A useful website offering practical ideas for helping those bereaved in the family and school community.

www.chums.info A bereavement support service for children who have suffered a loss

www.juliesplace.com A support resource for bereaved siblings

www.bhf.org.uk/smallcreature British Heart Foundation site to help children come to terms with loss using cartoon creatures. An animated film and we have a printed pack to go with it.

www.bbc.co.uk/.../bereavement/bereavement_helpchildren.shtml Information on the way bereavement affects children

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/index.htm> Federation of organisations

www.talktostars.org.uk A bereavement and counselling service, for children in Cambridgeshire, who have suffered a loss
