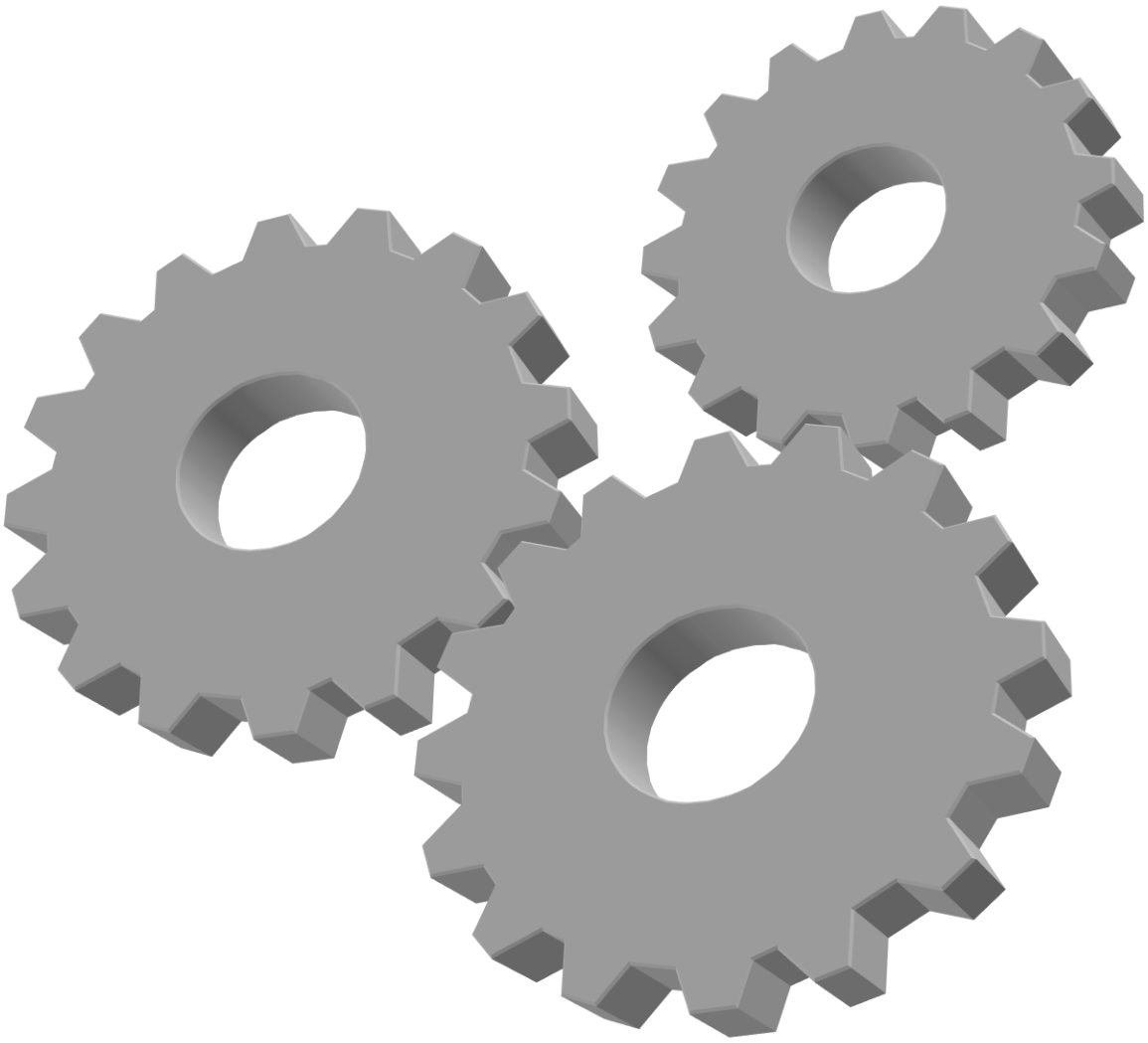

BEREAVEMENT TOOLKIT

Table of Contents

Contents

The suggestions made in this guide are not prescriptive and you need to look at every situation on a case-by-case basis.

All documents which are written in ***red*** in this handbook (see below) are stored in alphabetical order on the secure Staff Area of the Aspirer Website;

https://www.aspireeducationaltrust.co.uk/staff

Username staff@aet.cheshire.sch.uk

Password: Asp1re

Please click on the Bereavement section in the blue panel on the right hand side.

Resources

- TPS - death notification form (family)
- TPS- death in service guidance
- TPS Death in Service Fact Sheet
- Supporting yourself and others
- Talking to children about illness
- Samaritans Media Guidelines
- Resources and further reading
- Teacher resilience during coronavirus
- Sample script
- Sample letter to pupils

1. Children's Understanding of Death

Children and young people 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. The age categories given are guidelines only.

2-5 Years

Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality. Some may not appreciate the permanence of death: 'Shall we dig granny up now?' They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as 'gone away' or 'gone to sleep'. Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened. As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death. They are prone to fantasise at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something scarier than reality.

5-8 Years

At about five years of age most children are beginning to realise that dead people are different from those who are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink. At around seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone. This can result in separation anxiety. They are better-able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected. They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust. They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.

8-12 Years

At this age children's understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts. An important factor is their deepening realisation of the inevitability of death and an increasing awareness of their own mortality. This can result in fear and insecurity. Their need to know details continues, and they will seek answers to very specific questions.

Adolescence

The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving. Death increases anxieties about the future, and they may

question the meaning of life and experience depression. Teenagers may find it easier to discuss their feelings with a sympathetic friend or adult than with a close family member. They may be having difficulty coming to terms with their own mortality and that of those close to them; they may cope with this by refusing to contemplate the possibility of death by taking part in risk-taking behaviour. Anger makes up a large part of their grief, often compounded by a sense of injustice.

2. Cultures and Beliefs

Schools are part of a multi-cultural society in which various beliefs, religious and non-religious, are required to be taken into account. Respect for the differing needs, rituals and practices of different cultures is essential when acknowledging a death. In some cultures, extended family plays a very important role in the child's life and the death of a relative can have a profound impact.

The following descriptions give an overview of the major religions and belief systems that are found in the UK.

Buddhism

Buddhists believe that nothing that exists is permanent and everything will ultimately cease to be. There is a belief in rebirth but not of a soul passing from one body to another. The rebirth is more a state of constantly changing being rather than a clear cut reincarnation. The ultimate objective is to achieve a state of perfect peace and freedom. Buddhists try to approach death with great calmness, and an open-minded attitude of acceptance. There are few formal traditions relating to funerals and they tend to be seen as non-religious events. Cremation is the generally accepted practice and the service is kept very simple. It may be conducted by a Buddhist monk or sometimes family members.

Christianity

Christians believe that there is just one God and that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. They believe that Jesus died on the cross (The Crucifixion), and that three days later, God raised him from the dead (The Resurrection). Christians believe in an afterlife and also the idea of resurrection but the details around what actually happens at the time of death and afterwards varies within the different denominations. For some, as soon as a person dies, he or she is judged by God and will immediately go to Heaven or Hell, dependent on how

good or bad a life they led. For Roman Catholics, there is a half-way place called Purgatory, where an impure soul can stay until fit to enter Heaven. Others believe in the Day of Judgement, when the world will end and the dead will return to life to be judged by God.
Within the different Christian denominations, there are many variations on what happens at a funeral. When someone dies, the body is taken to an undertaker who will carry out the necessary preparations for the body to be laid out. This is to enable those who wish to view it to do so before it is placed in a coffin. The funeral, organised by an undertaker, is about one week after the death. This usually takes place in a church, but sometimes a crematorium, or a combination of the two.

Wreaths or bunches of flowers may be placed on the coffin. It is traditional to wear black but this custom varies. If held in a church, the funeral service may include a Holy Communion, Eucharist or Mass. The body will either be buried or cremated, dependent on the wishes of the deceased and the family. A churchyard grave is often marked by a headstone, but for a cremation the family may choose a more informal way to mark where the ashes are buried or have been scattered

Hinduism

Hindus believe in reincarnation and a cycle of rebirths. When a person dies, the soul is reborn in a new body, returning to earth in either a better or worse form. What a person does in this life will influence what happens to them in the next, the law of Karma. Those who have performed good deeds in this life will be reborn into higher order families, those whose behaviour has been bad will be born again as outcasts.

A Hindu funeral is as much a celebration as a remembrance service. Hindus cremate their dead, as it is the soul that has importance, not the body which is no longer needed. White is the traditional colour and mourners usually wear traditional Indian garments. If you are attending the funeral, it may be worth asking what will be appropriate dress. During the service, offerings such as flowers or sweetmeats may be passed around and bells rung; sound is a part of the ritual. The chief mourner, usually the eldest son, and other male members of the family, may shave their heads as a mark of respect. In India, the chief mourner would light the funeral pyre. Here, he will press the button to make the coffin disappear and, in some instances, may be permitted to ignite the cremator. Ashes may be taken back to India to be scattered on the River Ganges. In the UK, some areas of water have been designated as acceptable substitutes.

The mourning period lasts between two and five weeks.

Humanism

Humanists are non-religious. They follow the principle that this life is the only one we have and therefore when you are dead there is no moving on to another one. The focus of a Humanist funeral is on celebrating the life of the deceased; stories are shared and memories recalled and their favourite music may be played. This is done by friends and family who are supported by an Officiant. The ceremony, usually a cremation, will be tailored to meet the family's wishes rather than following a set pattern.

Islam

Muslims believe in life after death when, on the Last Day, the dead will come back to life to be judged by Allah. The good will reside in Paradise, the damned in Hell. Muhammad teaches that all men and women are to serve Allah and that they should try to live perfectly, following the Qur'an. Devout Muslims believe that death is a part of Allah's plan and open expressions of grief may be viewed as disrespectful to this belief.

As cremation is forbidden, Muslims are always buried, ideally within 24 hours of the death. Ritual washing is usually performed by the family or close friends at the undertakers or mortuary. They will wrap the body in a clean cloth or shroud. The coffin is often very plain as traditionally one would not have been used. The grave is aligned to enable the head of the deceased to be placed facing the holy city of Mecca. Muslim graves are unmarked, but to meet UK requirements, a simple headstone is used as a compromise.

There is an official mourning period of three days when the family will remain at home and be brought food by friends and relatives. For forty days after the funeral, relatives may wish to make regular visits to the grave on Fridays.

Judaism

In the Jewish religion, death is not seen as a tragedy but as a natural process and as part of God's plan. Jewish practices following a death aim to ensure respect is shown to the dead but also aim to provide comfort to the living. When a Jewish person dies mourners will recite the prayer Dayan HaEmet, which recognises God's power as the true judge. According to Jewish law, it is believed that the body should be interred as soon as is practical after the death, which means that funeral planning begins immediately. It is believed that when a Jewish person dies, their body should not be left unattended. The rabbi or the funeral home can help coordinate a shomer (guardian) who can stay with the body. This may be a family member, a friend or a member of the congregation. There may be more than one shomer, or people taking turns in acting as shomer to ensure someone stays with the body at all times. The

shomer may just sit with the body although it is traditional for the shomer to recite tehillim (psalms). Open caskets are forbidden and bodies are buried not cremated

There are several periods of mourning beginning with aninut, the time between death and burial which is generally just a day or two. After the burial a close friend or relative will prepare a first meal for the family of the deceased. Shiva is the period following the burial which lasts until the seventh day afterwards. Shloshim is the next period of mourning which lasts until the 30th day after the burial, during which time the mourners do not attend celebratory events. Avelut is the final period of formal mourning which is observed only for the death of a parent. This period lasts for 12 months after the burial and for 11 of those months, starting from the time of the burial, the deceased's son daily recites the mourner's Kaddish.

Sikhism

Sikhs believe the soul goes through a cycle of rebirths, with the ultimate objective being to reach perfection, to be reunited with God and, as a result, break the cycle. Thus death holds no fear and mourning is done discretely. The present life is influenced by what happened in previous ones and the current life will set the scene for the next.

The deceased is cremated as soon as possible after death. The coffin is taken to the family home where it is left open for friends and family to pay their respects. It is then taken to the Gurdwara where hymns and prayers are sung. A short service follows at a crematorium, during which the eldest son presses the button for the coffin to move behind the curtain. In India, the eldest son would light the funeral pyre and no coffin would be used. After the funeral, a meal may be held at the Gurdwara. The ashes may be taken back to India to be scattered. In the UK they may be sprinkled in the sea or a river.

The family remain in mourning for several days after the funeral and may listen to readings from the Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Book).

General points for Eastern faiths:

Within a faith there are often many variations so it is important not to be prescriptive - beliefs can be moderated by life in a Western Culture. This is especially so for the younger generation, who may find it difficult to fit in with the stricter requirements of older members of a family or community.

Families tend to be much more involved in preparing the body and the funeral arrangements than in Christian faiths. Because of belief in an afterlife, it is

important that the whole body is retained. Post- mortems therefore tend to be viewed as unwelcome procedures.

The coffin is likely to be kept at home until the funeral and may well be open. Those who wish to pay their respects will be welcome.

Whilst the above outlines some general characteristics of different faiths, remember that all families are different and will interpret traditions in their own way. All families have their own idiosyncratic culture specific to themselves and may have particular ways they would like things to be done. It is therefore very important not to make general assumptions and always best to ask families how they will mark the death / remember the person who has died.

3. Gypsy and Traveller Traditions

Death and bereavement are experiences common to most of us and few of us go through life without experiencing the death of someone close. Each situation is unique and how we respond to such a death is very individual. How we cope with bereavement is dependent upon many things, including our previous experience, our individual vulnerability and aspects of our lifestyle. People living in Gypsy and Traveller communities are no exception. However, there are aspects of their lives that may make coping with death and bereavement more challenging. There are an estimated 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers (including English Romany Gypsies, Welsh Gypsies, Scottish and Irish Travellers, Fairground Travellers, Barge or Boat Dwellers, European Roma and New Travellers) living in the UK. This information sheet has been written to help increase understanding of the factors facing Gypsies and Travellers following the death of someone close. It also aims to identify what support might be helpful to this community.

Gypsy and Traveller communities have a higher death rate than the mainstream population. Figures show that they have the poorest life chances of any ethnic group in the UK. The nature of Traveller lifestyles increases their risk of poor health and death. Gypsies and Travellers have a shorter life expectancy than the mainstream population (by 10 years for men and 12 years for women), are more likely to experience the premature death of a child (17% compared to just under 10% of the wider population) and have a high suicide rate, particularly amongst young men.

There are many reasons behind these statistics, and these include the mobile lifestyle of Gypsies and Travellers, limited access to healthcare and the lack of safe stopping places. This means that they may be living in unhygienic and poor environments, or at a roadside, increasing the risk of illness, road traffic accidents and fire hazards. There are also problems for Gypsies and Travellers

living in static houses where they may feel restricted by a fixed and immobile lifestyle. This can result in an increased risk of mental health problems and risk-taking behaviour.

The close-knit nature of these communities, with families who see each other on a daily basis, means that the death of an individual can be felt with great intensity, impacting a wide network of people. This makes death a very important part of Gypsies' and Travellers' lives, with a death becoming both a personal and a social loss, and influencing their approach to the rituals surrounding death, such as funerals.

Funeral traditions

Whilst each family is individual and will have their own ways of doing things, certain traditions held amongst gypsies and Travellers may have an impact on the way each person grieves. Traditionally, the trailer (caravan) and all the possessions of the person who had died would have been burnt. Today they are more likely to be sold. This removing of memories and possessions means that any connection with the person whom has died has gone. Children and young people can find the absence of reminders of someone who they may have been close to very difficult. The practice of 'sitting up', of not leaving the deceased alone from the time of death until the funeral, is common and may impact on family members in different ways. For many families, religion may be an important aspect of Traveller life and traditionally funerals in these communities take place quickly, particularly for Irish Travellers who are Catholic. This may limit the amount of time available to discuss how different family members would like things to be done.

Gypsy and Traveller funerals may be extremely lavish and headstones ornate. These are seen as an expression of the very respected and valued place the individual held within both the family and the wider community. It is not unusual for people to travel a great distance across the country to attend a very elaborate event, with a perception that the larger the funeral, the greater the respect shown; the showing of such respect and the holding of extravagant services is seen as an illustration of the importance of the place that is held by the dead in the lives of the living.

Impact on children and young people

Children and young people grieve just as deeply as adults but they may show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by mirroring the responses of the adults around them and rely on adults to provide them with what they need to support them in their grief. It is normal for children and young people to react strongly to the death of someone close even if the resulting feelings and

behaviours look and feel far from normal. Children in Gypsy and Traveller communities are no different in this way. However, differences in cultural expectations in these communities highlight a general reluctance in some Gypsy and Traveller families to discuss bereavement and loss following a death. This may be a protective strategy and designed to shield family members from upset but can inadvertently lead to difficulties in managing their grief. For children, this means that they may not have the emotional support they need to understand their feelings and to make sense of what has happened. At Child Bereavement UK, that they need to have honest, simple explanations of how we might feel and what we do when someone dies.

Children in Gypsy Traveller communities often take part in nearly all aspects of adult life, including all the rituals surrounding a death and the funeral. However, the protective nature of Traveller families may mean that the death of someone important to a child is often not openly talked about. Children often tell us that being involved and being given choices about participation in such rituals can be very helpful. We also know that in families where there is more open communication about the death and about the person who has died, the child's longer-term adjustment is generally better. Whilst talking about someone who has died can be difficult for these families, it is important for children to feel able to ask questions and understand what has happened. Children and young people may benefit from the opportunity to remember and share thoughts and feelings about the person who has died. However, such open discussion can often present a challenge to Gypsy and Traveller families. This can make it harder for these families to access external support agencies such as mental health or bereavement services.

A book based on a series of workshops held with grieving Gypsy Traveller children has been written by Carol Rogers (see below). It has been designed to be read by an adult and child together and can act as a gentle way in to start conversations about the person who has died. The book is illustrated using photographs of members of Gypsy Traveller communities. The aim is that by reading the book together, the adults will find it easier to talk to children about something that their culture may not encourage, and that the children will receive the emotional support they need from close family members.

Supporting Gypsy and Traveller Families

As with any family, when supporting Gypsy and Traveller families it is important to keep in mind the cultural attitudes and behaviours relating to death. Each family experiencing a death will have their own idiosyncratic way of managing the bereavement and each individual within the family may differ greatly in terms of the kind of support they need.

4. Breaking Bad news

When someone within a school community has died, it is often difficult to know how to break the news.

School communities have very active grapevines and it is better to explain sensitively what has happened rather than saying nothing.

Pupils

When the death affects an individual, It is important to take the wishes of the pupil, siblings, and the rest of the family into account. However, schools have a duty of care to all their pupils and sometimes it is necessary to say something before it has been possible to contact the family. In this situation, a simple acknowledgement of the death is all that is needed.

Many schools tell the class or year group most affected first and follow this up with a brief acknowledgement during assembly. If the bereaved pupil(s) are at school, ask them if they want to be at the assembly. If not attending school, ensure they are told what was said and to whom.

When the death affects the whole school, again check that the bereaved family are aware and OK with what you are going to say.

Guidelines for Breaking Sad News

- Whoever is giving the news should prepare what to say. Staff should be offered help with this.
- If a pupil dies by suicide Samaritans provide step-by step programme to support schools in explaining this to pupils. They can be contacted on: 0808 168 2528
- Don't be afraid to show emotion - this just shows that you are human, but can throw you if you are not expecting to react in this way.
- Start by acknowledging you have some sad news to give.
- Be honest. Give the news stating simple facts, use the words dead/died.
- If known, explain where and when the death occurred. Only include how if family are OK with this.
- If not known, say so, and that you will endeavour to find out. If rumours are rife, say which of these are definitely not correct, if known.

- Talk briefly about the person who has died without eulogising them.
- Mention any arrangements already in place
- Close by acknowledging that not everyone will be feeling sad and that is OK.
- Give pupils something practical and positive to do, such as making cards or writing something.

Other families

It is a good idea to let other parents know, certainly the ones whose children are likely to be directly affected. Initially, the basic information is all that should be given out. Once you have checked with the bereaved family, more details can be given if felt necessary. You may wish to let them know about the fact sheet *Guidance for parents and carers* (included in this pack). This will help them answer questions from their children and understand any possible reactions.

Breaking sad news in an assembly

A whole school assembly may not be appropriate or wanted, especially if it is an individual pupil who has been bereaved. However, sometimes this is the best way to give the news, particularly when the death has affected the whole school. The decision will be influenced by the size of the school and if the person who died was well known to the school community, or not. The benefit is that the entire school receives the same news, at the same time, keeping speculation and rumour at bay.

Follow the assembly with some classroom time for pupils to express any thoughts or feelings around the news they have just been given. Reactions will vary, but it is helpful for everyone to be given an opportunity to process the news and respond in some way, should they feel the need to. Classes directly affected may welcome the opportunity to write something or make cards.

Suggested words for a Primary School assembly:

I have some very sad news to tell you. Jim Jones in Year 5 died on Saturday morning in road traffic accident. An ambulance was called and Jim was taken to hospital. The doctors and nurses did all they could to try to save his life but his injuries were too severe and tragically he died. His mum is not injured.

Jim was well known throughout the school for being a Manchester United fan and a very keen member of the football team. He was only nine years old and much too young to die but sadly, very occasionally, accidents do sometimes happen.

Some of you may be feeling shocked at this news, some of you might be feeling rather frightened, some of you might be feeling nothing at all. All of these feelings are OK.

When you go to your classes after this assembly, you can spend some time thinking about what I have just told you. Your teachers will try to answer any questions that you might have. We can all help Jim's family a little bit by drawing a picture of our favourite memory of Jim or just writing a card that we can send to let them know that we are thinking about them.

The school will probably be holding a special assembly next week for Jim when we can spend more time thinking about him, remembering him, and saying a special goodbye. When I have more details I will let you all know. If any of you have ideas for this or would like to take part, I would love to hear from you.

When a teacher dies

When a staff member has died, it is often difficult to know how to break the news. School communities have very active grapevines and it is better to explain sensitively what has happened, rather than say nothing. In addition to the guidelines above there are a few additional considerations to take account of when it is a teacher who has died.

Information

Firstly, check that the information you have is correct. It is important to speak to family members, if possible, as they may have specific wishes about what information they would like shared. Check that they are happy with what you are going to say to staff and to pupils.

Staff

Always try to communicate with staff first and then pupils. Do this as quickly as possible. If the news is given early, it will help to avoid rumours and whispers. Try to do this face to face, but if that is not possible, make sure that other communication methods are followed up with personal contact. Give staff time to absorb the news. Remind them of any support available, the school procedure for such situations (it will help greatly if you have a clear bereavement policy in place), and that they can call the Child Bereavement UK helpline 0800 02 888 40 for guidance, or just a confidential chat. Staff directly affected will need support and, ideally, not be left on their own while in the classroom. It may be necessary to arrange cover for their classes.

Pupils

When the death affects an individual (e.g. if the teacher has children who are pupils in the school), if possible, take the wishes of the pupil, siblings, and the rest of the family into account. Many schools firstly tell the class or year group most affected and follow this up with a wider acknowledgement during assembly. If there are bereaved pupil(s) at school, ask them if they want to be at the assembly. If the children are not attending school, ensure they are told what was said and to whom.

5. Special assemblies - saying 'goodbye'

Most schools feel that organising some sort of special assembly or remembrance service after a death in a school community is a helpful thing to do. It can put back a sense of normality into what may have been a very unsettled time. Below are some ideas to help you organise something appropriate.

Why hold a special assembly?

- To bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened;
- To reflect on, and remember, the life of the person who has died;
- To normalise and share grief;
- To give the message that it is OK to be sad but equally OK to not be affected;
- To inform pupils and staff of any support that is available.

Who should attend?

Anyone who wishes to be there: teaching and non-teaching staff, pupils, any family who feel able to attend. In a very large school it may not be possible to get everyone together and a year group assembly might be more appropriate. Many families find comfort in other people organising something special and appreciate being there. Others may not wish to participate but should be given the opportunity to do so.

Who should be involved?

Anyone who wants to be. Pupils have produced some very moving assemblies about friends who have died. It helps them to feel involved and gives a sense of doing something positive. Very young children will need greater amounts of adult input but can still participate in a way appropriate for their age and understanding.

How to structure a special assembly

Have a clear beginning, middle and an end. Start by explaining the purpose and length of the assembly. Follow with a brief reminder of the circumstances surrounding the death and when it happened. Explain that everyone is different and some people will be more affected than others, but whether deeply sad, just a bit thoughtful, or anything in between, that is fine.

The middle section could include:

- Lighting a special remembrance candle.
- Favourite music / songs or poems of the person who has died.

  • Pupils or staff taking it in turns to recount stories or memories.
- Photographs of the person or child who has died to give a visual reminder, but remember a large image can be too much for any grieving family attending.

  •Placing objects associated with the person who has died into a special memory box. This can then be given to the family.

  • Talking about a memory tree or collage made by sticking a collection of drawings that pupils have created onto a large shield a primary school, reading a story. See *Resources* section at the end of this pack.

The end needs some thought and is better if it can leave everyone with a sense of looking forward. Some suggestions include:

- Giving a memory book to the family.
- Blowing out the remembrance candle.
- After leaving the assembly, pupils who wish to, planting a bulb or plant to create a special memory garden.
- Asking pupils to bring a farewell message to the person who has died to put into a special box as they leave. This can help pupils to personalise a goodbye.
- Playing reflective but uplifting music can help to create the right atmosphere.
- Remind pupils of what support is available to them.

Afterwards

It is best to arrange the assembly before a break. Pupils and staff will need space to reflect before carrying on with the normal school timetable. Some schools time it for the end of lessons but the build-up throughout the day can be difficult to handle. If arranged for the end of the school day, leave time for pupils to compose themselves before leaving for home. Be prepared for different responses; some pupils may be deeply affected, others not at all, or they may behave out of character. Ensure they all know where to go for support if required. Resources - see various fact sheets and books (included in this pack)

6. Supporting grieving pupils

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.

Normality

For a child or young person whose life has been turned upside down by bereavement, the routines of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may feel like it has fallen apart but school and the people within it can offer a sense of security and continuity. For young children and adolescents, school can give relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home. They may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family. There may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young people can find this difficult to deal with.

A listening ear

Children can be overlooked by family members struggling to deal with their own grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened, with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm. When someone important to them, has died, children and young people can try to spare their close family member by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief.

The opportunity to be a child

Even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. Loss and grief are very grown up experiences. School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty.

General support

Keep in contact with home. Discuss concerns, but remember that successes are equally important. The family or carers will find this reassuring. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the child is coping.

Be proactive

Have a selection of resources available in school on the subject. Refer to the Books and resources fact sheets in this pack for ideas. Stories are a wonderful way to gently introduce young children to the concept of death. Novels and poems offer young people a chance to learn through reading, listening and discussion. For more ideas see the For schools section of the website www.childbereavementuk.org

When someone dies in your school community, whether the death is one that affects an individual pupil or of someone known to the whole school community, how you respond will be remembered by everyone affected, child or adult. The school's response will depend on individual circumstances and the needs of pupils, staff and the wider school community.

Someone from school should liaise with the family. Offer to visit if the family would find this helpful. A card or letter of condolence will reassure the family of your support.

Avoiding the subject always makes matters worse. It is better to explain what has happened in a sensitive way to avoid rumours and whispers. Use the correct words 'death' and 'dead' rather than euphemisms such as 'lost' or 'gone to sleep'.

Breathing space - 'time out'

The pupil is given permission to leave class for a short time when beginning to feel out of control or just to get some personal space when upset. It is important that staff are made aware to avoid embarrassing scenes for either the pupil or the teacher. It is essential that the pupil does not just wander around the school but goes to a designated place and person. Identify a way in which the pupil can comfortably show they are struggling e.g. an item/card is carried with the pupil and if the pupil signals to the teacher (item or card left on the desk/ shown to the teacher) the pupil may leave the room without having to ask.

Pocket comforter
A pupil can discretely carry in their pocket a soft piece of fabric or a pebble or stone. Holding onto something solid can help a pupil to remain grounded and in control if upset. Equally, touching a piece of garment that belonged to the person who has died can provide a comfort.

Diary
A way to communicate with a bereaved child who finds it difficult to verbalise feelings. The pupil leaves the diary in a mutually agreed place having written or drawn whatever they wish. The teacher responds in the diary and either leaves it to be picked up or discreetly returns it to the pupil.

Happy / sad faces
The bereaved pupil has a sheet of paper or a paper plate with two drawings of faces on either side, one happy, one sad. The pupil shows the side the face that reflects how they are feeling on a particular day. This gives the teacher an idea of how they are and therefore which approach to use.

7. Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs

All children and young people, regardless of their circumstances, have a right to have their grief recognised, hear the truth and to be given opportunities to express their feelings and emotions. Children with learning difficulties are no different but may need extra help with their understanding and ways to express feelings.

Communicating the truth
Children with learning difficulties are sometimes assumed to need protection from death and dying more than most, or not to have the capacity to understand. Whilst to a certain extent this is true, we often underestimate their abilities to cope with tough things in life. The challenge is finding creative ways to communicate when words are sometimes not appropriate.

- If using words, use the real ones e.g. dead and dying, not euphemisms.
- Use as many real life examples if you can, e.g. pictures of funerals and coffins to aid understanding.
- Acknowledge any death. To ignore what has happened implies that this is an unimportant event and denies the existence of the person who has died.
- Pre-grief work is especially important to help prepare for an expected death.

Understanding the concept of death

All children struggle with the concept of death and its permanence. Children with learning difficulties may find this particularly difficult to grasp, especially the permanence, and may benefit from simple, practical examples to illustrate the difference between dead and living things. Very visual explanations are particularly important for children on the autistic spectrum. Some of these ideas may seem a bit macabre but it is what many SEND children need.

- Buy a bunch of flowers, put them in a vase and observe them wilt, wither and die. Compare to a fresh bunch of the same type. If kept, the dead flowers will illustrate that death is permanent, the flowers do not return to life.
- Purchase a dead fish from the supermarket and compare it to a live one. Even when put into a bowl of water the dead one will not move, breathe, eat or swim.
- Give the dead fish a burial that replicates as far as possible a real one. Explain a cremation by burning leaves and mixing the resulting ashes with some earth.
- Take photographs of the above and put into a book. This will act as a visual reminder for the many times when the explanation will need to be repeated.
- If appropriate, visiting the dead body will help with the concept of no life, but this will need careful preparation. Feeling that it is cold, observing no breathing or movement can aid understanding that the body is no longer working.

Expressing their grief

Children do not need protection from the feelings and emotions associated with grief but do need support to express them and reassurance that these sometimes powerful and overwhelming emotions are normal and necessary. This is even more the case for children with learning difficulties.

- Use a simple workbook such as 'When Someone Very Special Dies' by Marge Heegard. This can easily be adapted for various ability levels.
- Looking at photographs or watching videos of the person who has died can facilitate expressions of sadness or anger.
- Act as a role model, shed tears if genuinely felt, use symbols to communicate how you are feeling but also reassure that you are OK and your response is natural.

- Carrying a comfort object such as a small piece of warm furry blanket can be an aid for getting through difficult moments.
- Reassure that being angry is OK. Offer opportunities for safe ways to express frustration and anger which for all children can play a big part in their grief. Use a pillow as a focus for their anger.

Remembering the person who has died

- A piece of fabric from an item of clothing carried in a pocket or made into a cushion can be comforting.
- Placing their favourite perfume or after shave on a hanky.
- Putting together a memory box of tangible reminders chosen by the child. This can help give some insight into factors and events that are key to the relationship with the person who has died. • Listening to audio tapes of the voice or favourite music of the person who has died may help the visually impaired. • Use a time line to spark off memories of significant events and pictures to build the deceased's life story.

8. Supporting Parents – providing guidance

When supporting a bereaved family, or informing other families of a death within the school community, parents and carers may appreciate guidance to help them respond to questions and better understand reactions from their children. Below is information you can give to parents which they may find helpful and reassuring.

Most children and young people affected by a death just need adults who care about them. You cannot take away their sadness, but you can acknowledge it and support them through the experience. Reactions will vary. If they were not close to the person who died, they may be unaffected. However, it is best not to make assumptions. Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them.

Questions are healthy, as is curiosity. A good approach with any age is to acknowledge what has happened and then answer questions as they arise. Having accurate information will enable you to answer questions with facts rather than rumour; try to obtain this from a reliable source so that information is both accurate and sensitive to the wishes of the bereaved family.

Young children often do not have adult inhibitions surrounding death and you may be taken aback by some of their comments and reactions. It is not unusual for them to act out funerals or play at being dead. It is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Teenagers may become withdrawn and difficult to engage with. Respect their need for personal space whilst gently reminding them that you are there if they need you.

Children often have a surprising capacity to deal with the truth, if given information in simple, straightforward language, appropriate for their age and understanding. Young children tend to make up what they do not know and their imaginings are often worse than the reality. Adolescents and teenagers will resent a lack of honesty in the adults around them and the resultant loss of trust will be difficult to regain.

Maintain routines, such as going to school. Familiar situations and contact with friends brings security and a sense of normality. Continue to expect the usual rules of behaviour. Normality with love and compassion is what to aim for.

Do not think that you have to hide your own sadness.
Seeing adults expressing emotion can give a child of any age 'permission' to do the same, if they feel they want to. Hearing how you are feeling may help them to consider their own feelings. Be ready to listen but don't expect your child to always want to talk. They usually will when ready, and often to people who are not immediate family. One way to create opportunities for sharing thoughts and memories is with a joint activity. Young people especially, tend to talk when they do not feel under pressure to do so.

You may notice some of the following which are all normal as long as they do not continue for too long:

• Change in behaviour, perhaps becoming unnaturally quiet and withdrawn or unusually aggressive.
• Anger is a common response at all ages and may be directed at people or events which have no connection to the death.
- Disturbed sleep and bad dreams.
- Anxiety demonstrated by clingy behaviour and a reluctance to be separated from parents or carers. Older children may express this in more practical ways, for example by expressing concerns over issues that adults may perceive as insensitive or unimportant.
- Being easily upset by events that would normally be trivial to them.

- Difficulty concentrating, being forgetful and generally 'not with it.' This makes school work particularly difficult and academic performance may suffer. Older children may feel that there is no point in working hard at school and they might lose a general sense of purpose in their lives.
- Physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches and a general tendency to be run down and prone to minor illness.

Grief is a natural and necessary response to a death. However, if concerned about your child, do not hesitate to seek advice.

9. Supporting Staff

Being alongside anyone experiencing a loss can be emotionally draining, but supporting a bereaved child, particularly so. The need for support for yourself is not a sign of an inability to cope or of professional incompetence, but a recognition that everyone needs help to carry out this demanding role. Below are some ideas for ways to look after yourself.

Share feelings

Use friends and colleagues to talk about how you are feeling and to share experiences. Just knowing that others are affected can help you to feel less alone and better-able to cope. Informal peer support in the staffroom can be a welcome opportunity to talk through issues and concerns and reduce feelings of inadequacy by jointly talking through strategies to help.

Anticipate that you may experience an emotional reaction

It is perfectly normal and OK to be emotionally affected. However, recognise that in order to help others, you need to feel reasonably strong yourself. You may become aware of previous losses in your own life that have resurfaced. If it all feels too close to home, do not be afraid to say so. This is not a sign of weakness but merely a recognition that we all have our limits.

Professional boundaries

When working in a school environment, it is very easy to let the carer in us take over and forget our professional boundaries. Getting over-involved is not helpful to either yourself or to the bereaved child or adult. Remember that you cannot carry their grief for them, but you can share their journey by being there for them and being aware.

Have information on resources and organisations

Sharing contact details of bereavement organisations will enable you to do something practical to support a grieving family. You will be helping by putting them in touch with people who are qualified and experienced in offering the support they might need. See: *Helpful organisations* fact sheet (in this pack).

Help others

If you become aware that a colleague is stressed or affected by a death in your school community, or know that they have experienced a bereavement themselves, try to find the time to ask how they are.

Spoil yourself

Make time to do something just for you, or give yourself a treat. Physical exercise can be a great stress buster.

Factors that can contribute to overload

Supporting bereaved children is emotionally demanding. In a study by Brown (1993), teachers from five schools cited the following factors as contributing to their stress:

- Witnessing pain and distress experienced by the families.
- Feeling unskilled in dealing with emotional responses.
- Physical exhaustion as a result of emotional trauma.
- Poor communication between themselves and families or other carers

A study by Lane, Rowland and Beinart (2014) showed that teachers often feel uncertain how to respond to bereaved adolescents, particularly in relation to talking about the bereavement, yet feel an obligation to stay strong, to address the bereavement and to provide support even if distressed themselves. They found that teachers best managed their own emotions through setting boundaries in their professional role, creating emotional distance, seeking support from colleagues or using their own social networks or social agencies. They also identified the benefit of drawing on teachers' own experience of bereavement and the usefulness of bereavement training.

It does not help to offer something that you cannot deliver

No matter how well-meant or strong the desire to take the pain away, always try to be realistic with the amount of support that you can give. It is much better to offer something small but constant rather than a grand

gesture that is going to be difficult to deliver. Providing a listening ear once a week and sticking to it is more meaningful than the offer of help anytime when inevitably that cannot be achieved within a busy school environment.

You do not need to be an expert to provide effective help

Many people feel inadequate and out of their depth when faced with adults or children experiencing deep sadness or trauma. Being alongside children who are hurting can remind us of our own vulnerability and immortality. Most teachers and school staff are caring individuals who naturally have the characteristics required to support bereaved children. It is more about being there for them whilst in school and building a relationship with them in your classroom, than being a bereavement professional.

Try to recognise when you are running on empty

Working in the education profession is very much about giving in terms of time and energy; supporting a bereaved pupil may compound this, resulting in depleted resources. It can be difficult to ask for help when we most need it as to do so requires energy and strength. Some of the signs to look out for include feeling physically exhausted and overworked, an inability to delegate and generally not feeling on top of things.

10. Supporting Schools in the longer term – Bereavement Groups

The bereaved children and young people we support at Child Bereavement UK often tell us that what they need is easily accessible, informal support, and that they often feel more comfortable receiving this from their peers or from trusted adults other than parents and carers. Schools are ideally placed to meet this need by running a Support Group.

What are the benefits?

The adults in a family are often struggling with their own grief and they may have neither the emotional nor the physical capacity to support their bereaved children even if they would like to. For this reason, support may need to come from somewhere other than home. Schools that have set up bereavement groups tell us that pupils who attend:

- Build their own coping strategies and naturally start to support one another;
- Feel less isolated through meeting others in similar circumstances, normalising their experience;

• Have an opportunity to express emotions in a safe place and in a safe way;

• Can find it easier to talk to an adult who is not emotionally involved;

• Are easier to manage in class and are less likely to become school refusers;

• And appreciate an alternative to counselling which, for some children, is not what they need.

Which model to use?

There are no right or wrong models, it is very much about what fits with your school. Options that you may wish to consider include:

• Open groups, which provide the flexibility that some pupils require, enabling them to attend sessions intermittently and for as long as they feel the need. However, dependency can build up and endings can be difficult to achieve

• Closed groups, which run for a fixed length of time with a set group of pupils. The group dynamics are not disturbed by new members joining half-way through.

• A good compromise is to run a group for a fixed length of time with a set group of pupils but with the option of attending the next one for pupils who feel they need more support

A semi-structured approach appears to work well. Each session has a loose theme with a simple related activity but with the freedom to allow pupils to do as much or as little of the bereavement work as they feel able to cope with. Many bereaved children and young people who attend groups tell us that just being there is in itself can be immensely helpful.

Sometimes schools run groups just for pupils who are bereaved of a parent. Others open the groups to anyone who has been affected by the death of someone important to them. For the pupils, it is the shared grief experience that is important rather than the circumstances of the death, so a mixture of experiences is usually not a problem, even when traumatic such as a death by suicide. Small numbers are not a problem but too large a group can be. A ratio of around four pupils to each adult generally works well.

Who should run it?

Any staff member with commitment, time and who is secure with their own experiences of loss. Learning mentors and school counsellors are often involved. Bereavement professionals are not required, but some training on

loss, death and grief and the impact on children and young people will give staff confidence. Child Bereavement UK runs training on a range of relevant subjects, including how to facilitate support groups.

Referral process

This can be pupil-led by putting up posters in the school and letting anyone who wishes to, come along. Some schools invite pupils considered to be most in need of the support. This may exclude pupils who might be affected by a death of which the school is unaware. It is also important to remember the quiet pupils as well as those more obviously displaying their grief.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality needs careful thought, especially for adolescents and teens. Primary schools normally let parents/ carers know that their child is attending a group. For older pupils, a similar approach to that used with visits to a school counsellor may be more appropriate, with parents being aware that a bereavement group exists but not necessarily that their child is attending. Pupils will need to be reassured that confidentiality extends to the staffroom and that information will not be shared between staff without permission from the pupil concerned.

Timing

Lunchtime works for many schools with pupils either attending after eating lunch or bringing lunch with them. Some schools consider the support so important that their groups are timetabled into the school day. A pupil's absence from class is accepted by peers once the reason why is explained, and staff appreciate that the education of a pupil distracted by their grief from learning will benefit by attending the group. Consideration does need to be given to pupils who find the attention unwelcome. Groups held once a fortnight seem to have a good balance between contact and space to think, but timing is often dictated by the demands of the school timetable.

Important things to think about

- Think through how to respond and who to go to when pupils reveal 'tough stuff' or if Child Protection issues arise.
- Identify where to go for help when you feel out of your depth or that a child needs more support. You can always contact Child Bereavement UK's bereavement support team for guidance on 0800 02 888 40.

- Be wary of overstepping your professional boundaries by getting too involved.
- Be aware of the impact on yourself and possibility of your own losses being brought to the surface. It is essential to look after yourself. Make sure all staff involved have some sort of regular and compulsory support or supervision.

11. **Exemplifications**

Sample letter to parents

Dear Parents & Carers

It is with deep sadness that we write to inform you the news that (name), a pupil in Year has passed away.

(Name) has died from complications of the coronavirus. He was a very popular member of the class and will be missed by everyone who knew him.

When someone dies it is normal for their friends and family to experience lots of different feelings like sadness, anger and confusion. The children will be told that their teachers are willing to try to answer their questions through their online learning sessions and although we cannot be physically together to comfort children there will be emotional support available for Name's close friends and classmates. If there is anything more that you or your child needs to know, please do not hesitate to email the School office and we would be more than happy to help you.

I am sure you will join me in sending our thoughts and prayers to name's, family and close friends during this difficult time.

Yours sincerely

Headteacher