

Responding to Bereavement and Trauma

An information booklet
for Teachers



Northamptonshire
County Council

Helping the bereaved child or young person



Introduction

These notes have been prepared for teachers (and other adults) who are faced with an individual or group of bereaved children or young people. They are not designed to make you into specialist grief counsellors, but try to address the very practical questions that you are likely to face in this situation. They are intended to be used in conjunction with the booklet for children and young people. In this booklet, for ease of reading, the reference to children includes young people.

Children are all different and they will all react to the bereavement in their own unique way. The differences in their levels of awareness, understanding, age, emotional maturity, security and their relationship with the deceased will also have significant effects.

As adults we have become more sophisticated and prepared to accept the “shades of meaning in explanations” but children and even older teenagers can still see things in terms of “black and white”. The result is that their questions may be disconcertingly direct and blunt and we may find ourselves being upset by the



form of the question, or our inability to answer it fully.

Remember that in the matter of death (particularly when it is unexpected or ‘illogical’) we can only provide some of the answers and certainly not make it better (merely make it ‘less bad’ or less painful). The same questions may be asked again and again and you must be prepared to keep repeating your answers.

If the child feels secure in a relationship with you, it is likely that they will come to you specifically for comfort or enlightenment and you should have given some thought as to how you should proceed.

N.B. Not all the points in this booklet will apply to your particular situation, but hopefully give you a framework from where you might consider your own responses.

When should you tell the child/children that the person has died?

The child/children should be told as soon as possible to prevent him/her learning from some other inappropriate source. Try to use a normal tone of voice and clear direct language. Avoiding the subject always makes matters worse.

How should you tell them?

Whenever possible, children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where they will feel more secure.

What should you tell them?

It is very important to tell the truth as far as you know it. The truth is the best counter to rumour and fantasy which may build up. This information will stay with the child for a very long time. It is important to use words such as death and dead rather than euphemisms such as 'gone to sleep'.

They may not "take it all in" at this stage, but will go over and over the facts later, asking more questions and gradually assimilate more of the information. Do not worry about having to keep on giving the same answers.

How much should you explain?

As mentioned above, children will vary in their ability at any time to take in particular explanations. If your information is limited, then tell them

what you know and then make every effort to find out more. Check the facts and what the child has been told already.

In the absence of facts, our minds tend to fantasise and children may begin to believe that what they were doing might be related to the person's death. These fears may need to be brought out and talked about later.

Local gossip, and even newspaper reporting, may exaggerate the real facts, and an objective account of the true facts is the best counter to this.

What if I feel very upset myself and find it very difficult to talk?

It is very important to let children know that it is natural, and acceptable to be upset and to cry (even for adults). It is better to share feelings rather than to deny them, e.g. crying together.

Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from the extreme adult grief reaction, and adults who are prostrate with grief may need some time and space initially to release their most extreme reactions.



How can I explain some of the feelings?

You may wish to tell the child that you both may experience some strange and confusing feelings. Sadness and emptiness will predominate, but he/she may also feel guilty about the feelings of anger, jealousy and resentment which may occur.

Point out that this confused mixture of feelings is common and will eventually subside.

Try to get the child to talk about some of these feelings, perhaps by sharing some of yours with them.

How do I talk about what 'death' means?

The meaning will vary according to the child and family's religious beliefs. However, by listening to the child you might be able to ascertain whether they have developed bizarre or odd ideas about death.

Encourage the child to ask questions and tailor your answers to their level of understanding, within his/her home religion or culture and your own belief system.

This may be the first time that the child is confronted by his/her own mortality, and equally frightening, the fact that others near and dear to them will eventually die.

What if a child sees a "ghost"?

Children have the ability to recall very strong and 'real' images or memories of people (including smells, language, etc.) and these are often interpreted by other adults as ghosts. It is very normal to experience a strong after-impression of someone you are close to which is a very vivid memory. These recollections become less strong over time, although they are disconcerting because they arrive at unpredictable intervals.

What if the child feels that they are "too big to cry"?

Some children may have been brought up not to show their emotions and maintain a 'stiff upper lip'. Others, particularly those in their teens, may repress grief as they see crying as a babyish emotion which means that 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 synch" 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.

It is important that the adults "give children permission to grieve" as well as the opportunity and support, without



trying to force them to behave in a prescribed manner.

In what ways are adolescents different from younger children?

During their adolescence, young people have very confusing feelings about themselves and the world about them. Grief tends to heighten these feelings, increase the confusion and may mean the onset of severe and very deep depressions.

Talking about these feelings with a caring and supportive adult (who is available when required) is a useful approach rather than trying to be 'forcefully helpful'. However, at this time the individual may be orienting more towards his/her peers and away from their family, so do not feel rejected if they look to friends for their support and comfort. Just be available and tell them so.

Art, music and sport may be an effective way of expressing these feelings and should be encouraged.

Understanding of the concept of death is likely to vary at the primary age and may include some primitive notions such as:

- Failure to realise what has occurred
- Failure to appreciate irrevocability and irreversibility – that the dead person will not return
- Failure to understand the loss of bodily functions, movement, change of appearance
- Failure to understand the causes of death.

How long does it take to come to terms with bereavement?

Some societies (including Victorian England, which had dress and behaviour codes) had a formal period of mourning which helped both the bereaved and others to behave appropriately. There is no recognisable period in our present society (except in some religions, such as Judaism) so that each individual is left to progress at their own pace. This varies enormously from person to person.

There are several phases of grief (see stages of grief below). The initial stages of disbelief usually pass quickly, but many individuals are in this stage for some considerable time. The feelings of depression may have to be passed through, even fleetingly, 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. a 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 natural course. If a child is still having an extreme reaction after a month they may need referring on to an appropriate agency.

Are some children more vulnerable than others?

This varies according to age, developmental level and personal circumstances.

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, phobias, etc.) and should be reassured and comforted.

Other vulnerable children are those who may already have behaviour, emotional or social difficulties or those who have suffered a recent loss. These children may overreact to the 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.

How can I distinguish children who are attention-seeking from those who are grieving?

This is a difficult question to answer and really depends upon your knowledge of the child. It is true that some children, seeing the legitimate care and attention that genuinely upset children are getting, may seek attention. It is also important to remember that children who are usually attention-seeking also need to grieve, and be handled sensitively.

It is very important that all children, even those most upset, have boundaries set and know what is expected of them. This will give them the required security and realisation that “not all the world has changed”.

How should I manage the grieving child?

The routines of school life can give a sense of normality. The child needs to be part of a group and not singled out and it is an advantage if he/she is part of a group of grieving children. They should be expected to work, although it may be appropriate to inform them that you do not expect the same standard of performance.



The other members of their peer group can be mutually self-supporting, although you may choose to intervene in a helpful way if they appear to be simply upsetting one another.

It may be appropriate to set up a place within the school which is staffed to which children can be withdrawn if they are becoming upset in class in a way that is difficult to manage. It may be necessary to follow this up with the child, member of staff with pastoral responsibilities for the child and/or the child's parents.

Can a school or family religion be helpful?

It can be particularly helpful as it can provide explanations, support and, above all, structure for the child.

A particular problem may occur if the child begins to question the religious explanation, particularly if the death was unexpected. You may need guidance from a religious advisor at this stage.

What practical things can you do?

There are a number of practical things that children may choose to do (see children's booklet "Things you can do to help with your feelings"). You should have a selection of resources on the subject. Stories and novels are particularly valuable.

If you are dealing with a class, then a discussion of ideas will probably come up with several things such as cards, letters, pictures etc that they would like to do.



Do not be afraid to use the name(s) of the person who has died and talk about them naturally.

Should you find it personally difficult and need support with practical strategies, please feel free to discuss this further with your Children & Young People's Service contact.

What signs should I be alert to in determining whether a child needs further support?

Following a traumatic event, children may display a whole range of emotional and physical reactions. These can include lethargy (perhaps due to disturbed sleep), difficulties in concentration, forgetfulness, intrusive flashbacks, generalised nervousness or panic, irritability, reduced interest/motivation, depression, headaches, tummy aches, loss of appetite or over-eating, etc.



Younger children may display regressive or anti-social behaviour. When it is clear that a child is continuing to experience any of these reactions for longer than a month, then it may be appropriate to seek further support for the child.

What is the overall message in helping bereaved children?

Check out the facts and familiarise yourself with the circumstances surrounding the death. Communicate with the family and make sure that what you say will not conflict with the family's wishes.

Acknowledge what has happened and use clear language.

Be honest. Although sometimes difficult, it is better to answer awkward questions truthfully. Don't be afraid to say 'I don't know'.

Be prepared to listen, again and again and again.

Allow them to express emotion and feelings and do not be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness.

Do talk about the dead person and share any memories. The bereaved child may well need to do this.

Recognise the full tragedy. Do not try to comfort with comments such as "at least it is not as bad as" You might think this is helpful, it is not.

Reassure them that they are not responsible. It is very common for children and young people to feel that in some way they caused the death.

Give bereaved pupil's time. It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school work. Remember that they will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them.

Don't assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care. Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity.

Try not to judge, grief is a very personal experience, every child and young person will do it their way.

Look after yourself... share your feelings, be aware of your own emotional reaction. Spoil yourself.

Stages of Grief/Spiral of Bereavement

Grief is an essential response to a death and consists of several emotions which may be conflicting. There appear to be a series of stages that individuals go through but these can vary in length for individuals and do not always occur in a set order. It is also helpful to think of the process as a spiral so that any of these feelings will be experienced several times but gradually lessen.

Shock

Usually the first response, either in the form of physical pain or numbness, but more often consisting of complete apathy or abnormal calm.

Denial

Behaving as if the dead person is still there, e.g. planning for them, not accepting the evidence of their absence.

Depression

As the denial lessens the bereaved person begins to feel despair, emptiness and the pain of loss. It may be accompanied by emotional release such as crying, which may eventually ease the pain.

Guilt

This may be felt for real or imagined negligence or harm inflicted on the person who has died. The bereaved often have a need to feel responsible, may feel that they were wrong to be spared, should have shown more love, etc.

Anxiety

This occurs when full realisation of the loss penetrates the protective mechanisms of the individual. The person begins to accept the reality of the loss and becomes anxious about the changes and loneliness ahead. This can also lead to panic and possible suicide thoughts.

Often people think that they are abnormal because of the severity of their emotions, over which they have no control and which are alien to them.

Aggression

This is often felt against those individuals who were unable to prevent the loss, e.g. adults, family.

Sometimes, in the later stages, aggression may be felt against the person who has died for the pain and upheaval resulting from the death.

Acceptance and adjustment

A growing acceptance and adjustment to the loss. It is always likely to be painful remembering what has happened but the main residual feeling will be one of sadness.





Who is available to provide help?

Friends and family members (your natural National Counselling Services support system).

Colleagues in the work situation (peers and management).

Religious groups (child's, family's, your own, School's, any other)

Children & Young People's Service (Educational psychologist or specialist teachers)

Child Adolescent & Mental Health Services

Clarendon House,
8-10 Station Road
KETTERING
NN15 6EY
Tel: 01536 313850

6 Notre Dame Mews,
Northampton
NN1 2BG
Tel: 01604 604608

Youth Counselling Services

Wellingborough
Service Six
26 Rock Street
Wellingborough
Tel: 01933 226615
Corby

Green Door
Connaught Centre
Corby
Tel: 01536 200520

Kettering
Kettering Youth Information
William Knibb Centre
Kettering
NN12 8AA
Tel: 01536 510089

Daventry
Time to Talk
1 North Street
Daventry
Tel: 01327 706706

Northampton
The Lowdown
3 Kingswell Street
Northampton
Tel: 01604 622223



National Counselling Services

CRUSE – Bereavement Care

CRUSE House
126 Sheen Road
RICHMOND,
Surrey TW9 1UR
Tel: 08701 671677

Compassionate Friends

53 North Street
Bristol
BS3 1EN
Tel: 0117 9539639

Samaritans

Tel: Northampton 01604 637637
Kettering 01536 416999
Peterborough 01733 312727

Childline 0800 1111

Useful Website

Child Bereavement Charity

www.childbereavement.org.uk

Winston's Wish

www.winstonswish.org.uk

For further advice contact your area CYPS

Corby & Kettering

William Knibb Centre
Montagu Street
Kettering
NN16 8AE
Tel: 01536 533930

Daventry & South West

Administration Building
St John's Centre
Tiffield
Northants
NN12 8AA
Tel: 01604 857382

Northampton

Springfield
Cliftonville
Northampton
NN1 5BE
Tel: 01604 630082

Wellingborough & North East

Fairlawn Centre
Spring Gardens
Wellingborough
NN8 2AA
Tel: 01933 440289



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