



# **WHEN A STUDENT DIES**

**(Guidance for schools and colleges)**

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



# WHEN A STUDENT DIES

## Guidance for schools and colleges

When a child in your school dies, from whatever cause, there is a deep sense of shock and those left behind need support and guidance in the following days, months and years.

Children's horizons are opened up when they go to school and they make new friends and form strong bonds with the people around them on a daily basis. The school community becomes another family and when a student dies it can be like losing a member of the family. This can be extremely painful and bewildering. In such sad circumstances, schools have a vital role to play in offering assistance and support to bereaved families, siblings, friends and classmates.

### **School responses to the death of one or more students**

The death of a child or children within the school community raises whole-school issues that need careful thought and consideration. Many schools will already have a Bereavement Policy, and some Local Education Authorities (LEAs) offer guidance and specific support. Some key areas that need careful deliberation and action are:

- In the case of a sudden death the immediate need to tell all students and staff what has happened so that rumour is dispelled and everyone is in possession of the facts. Class, year group, or whole-school assembly is usually the most appropriate way to do this. This should be done with the express permission of the family and only information that the family agrees to should be shared. A short and respectful notice placed on the school website could immediately be available to the wider school community. In

an age where children widely use social media a fast response is important.

- Direct communication with parents informing them of the situation and alerting them to the distress their children may be suffering.
- Pastoral and emotional support for those most closely affected.
- Prepared strategies to prevent the media causing extra stress and intrusion. Ensure press attention is kept away from the school grounds and pupils where possible and appoint a member of staff to properly deal with any unwanted media presence. This member of staff may also make any formal press release with the permission and agreement of the family if there is no support from the LEA.
- The need to give thought to the attendance of students and staff at the funeral(s) in accordance with the wishes of the bereaved relatives.
- Careful preservation of any belongings, books and school work of the deceased child which should be respectfully returned to the family. Avoid at all costs the use of plastic bin bags.
- Bereavement Policy should cover systems for sharing information with all those who had contact with the deceased student. It is helpful to have a key member of staff take direct responsibility for talking to the students, to be available when needed, to make crisis contingency arrangements, and to pass on information to relevant people.

- The healing effects of a later occasion when the school community can come together to remember, mourn and celebrate the life of the individual(s).
- A permanent memorial such as an award, planting a tree, or preparing a special place to ensure remembrance in the future, in consultation with the bereaved family.

## **Grief of a child – recognising and dealing with changes in behaviour**

Grief is a natural response to death and can be totally incomprehensible. The younger the child the less understanding they will have about what has happened, yet they still feel the loss deeply. This suffering is more intense when they do not have opportunities to talk or to grieve openly. They may feel that those close to them do not recognise their feelings - even though they themselves may not yet have the words to express them. Members of school staff are likely to be the first to recognise changes in a child's behaviour.

### **Younger Children**

Young children can appear to be sad and withdrawn one minute and happy the next. Unlike adults young children do not yet have the emotional capacity to grieve continuously and they need respite through play activities. The fact that they have play breaks should not be viewed as a sign that they are "getting over it". Equally they should not be criticised for attention seeking when they do cry. Alternating play and sadness is a natural response in the young.

A bereaved child may well appear tired and listless. Bereavement can dramatically alter sleeping patterns and

some children may have night terrors. Some small children may be afraid to go to bed as they may associate sleep with the death of their sibling or classmate. Use of suitable language is very important and using phrases like "he was taken" or "she went to sleep" in connection with the recent death could add to the confusion and fear of the bereaved child. Words like 'loss' or 'lost' can also alarm a young child. School staff may find a bereaved child has fallen asleep at school. Extreme tiredness and lethargy will of course have a detrimental effect on a child's learning and progress but it should gradually improve as time goes on.

Most children welcome the opportunity to talk privately to an adult about their loss. Even if the child cannot verbalise his or her feelings, it is helpful for a trusted teacher to show compassion, (without saying "I know how you feel"), by using words like sad, lonely, upset, afraid, so that the child realises school staff want to help.

Books, stories, music and art can be very helpful in exploring loss, both with the class and with the bereaved child. There are many excellent books written on bereavement for different ages of children, both in the fact and fiction sections, now available from shops, libraries or the internet. Many school libraries do have a selection of such recommended publications.

## **Older Children**

Many children, like adults, experience lack of concentration and memory loss with bereavement. This could affect a child's academic progress. This will improve slowly over time and again tact and patience will be required by staff.

Some bereaved children will display extremes of emotion

which they themselves may struggle to comprehend and control. They may appear excessively frustrated and angry which can be frightening for all concerned. Bereaved adolescents will have the added physical changes of puberty to deal with and their emotions seesaw. A previously calm and good natured child may be transformed into someone rude and aggressive. This can be difficult for staff, but, by challenging this behaviour, you are letting the child know that you care about their well being and that you have not forgotten their bereavement.

Some students show no emotions as they deny their grief, keeping it buried deep inside. They may continue as normal, pretending the death has not happened. They may throw themselves into diversionary pursuits such as sport or academic studies. This denial is a way for these students to protect themselves from the reality of the death. It can be kept up for a long time but at some point the grief will erupt and they will have to go through the grieving process. Staff can help by taking the time to talk to the bereaved student and their family.

A small proportion of bereaved students may show extreme responses to their grief. They may seek to anaesthetise their pain through activities such as self harm, alcohol or substance misuse. When staff are concerned that a student may be engaging in any such high risk activity, swift intervention is needed.

Some children need a retreat when grief overtakes them, and it helps if the school accepts a student's need to express their grief, providing a 'safe place' and a trusted adult to be with them.

## **How school staff can help**

When the report of the death first comes to school, it may be appropriate for class teachers to talk to their students, to create opportunities for them to ask questions and discuss how they can help each other.

Classmates, especially close friends of the student who died, will suffer varying grief reactions. Their teachers will probably need the support of colleagues at this time; they might need to be reassured that their ideas for giving comfort to the students are wise, and that they will be of benefit to those in their care. Many younger teachers themselves may not have experienced bereavement, especially of this kind, before.

Embarrassment may make it hard for teenagers to acknowledge deep feelings while at school. Much will depend on the quality of the relationship which a class or pastoral tutor has with the student. It is very important to acknowledge the loss and the pain. Friends may need encouragement to talk openly about the death, and sometimes boys find it especially hard to express their sympathy in words.

## **Surviving siblings in your school or college**

A bereaved child, like an adult, may find themselves in a place of insecurity as their world has changed forever. Their self confidence may have vanished, and they feel anxious. Sometimes children regress and behave in ways they did when they were younger. This is a normal response to grief – the child reverts to being their younger self in a happier time where they felt safe, and their world was complete. Staff should be aware that regressive behaviour is likely to be noticed by other children, and could result in the bereaved

child being teased or worse, bullied

On the student's return to school, even close friends may need encouragement to voice difficult feelings, to say, "I'm sorry your brother died". One of the key 'hurts' which bereaved children recall is the feeling that few people, if any, acknowledged their loss.

When a student first returns to the classroom, they may suffer with "separation anxiety" as they leave their depleted family to come to school. This is more likely when they have been absent from school for some time. They may also be fearful of how their friends and classmates will react to them. It is helpful to appoint a member of staff with whom the child has a good rapport, to oversee their return to school and to listen to their concerns and worries.

Once the bereaved child returns to school routine, it is helpful to share concerns with parents so that they know how he or she is coping in school. Most families appreciate some sort of direct communication from the school, such as a phone call, especially if the child who has died was a pupil.

School routines should be kept as normal as possible for the bereaved child although there will be some events in the school year that will be difficult to bear. Significant anniversaries will be hard as bereaved families cope with their dead child's birthday for example. Christmas and other religious festivals and family gatherings highlight the hole left by the dead child. Staff should be vigilant and sensitive in supporting siblings, friends and classmates. It will help if key dates and times are noted and passed on to the next class teacher or next school, along with other records and information. As children mature, the death is felt and questioned at new emotional and intellectual levels, often



causing renewed grief and distress. School routines, music and drama, sport and homework may actually offer a feeling of security and normality to a grieving child, especially when the family home is in turmoil. The family may be so overwhelmed by the trauma that little individual acknowledgement is given to the child's feelings when they are at home.

Sensitivity is needed so that deep grief is not triggered at an inappropriate time. For example, a school assembly using the book *Badger's Parting Gifts* might help the school to explore grief and loss, but not when a newly-bereaved child is present.

Staff should be mindful that some students may feel shame or guilt as a result of the death of their sibling. They may feel they were in some way to blame for the death. Where possible staff should offer the child reassurance that they were not too blame and that they will continue to support them.

Sadly, it is a recognised fact that, especially among teenagers, problems can arise as a result of what they see as unfair attention given to a bereaved member of their school community. Resentment builds up and bullying can replace concern and support. These issues, hopefully, should be less difficult to deal with when the school has a teaching programme in tutor group periods, Religious Studies or Personal Health and Social Education that includes regular work on loss, death, emotions and life skills.

Communication with the family is still important, though it may be less direct or frequent when children are older. It is necessary to remember the bereavement on occasions such as Open Evening, when progress is discussed. When the

bereavement is recent, the taking of exams, or some of them, may need to be postponed until a pupil is better able to cope with the additional stress. Long-term awareness and communication are necessary as the pupil progresses through the school, especially when large numbers of staff are involved.

## **Judgemental attitudes**

A bereaved child desperately needs compassion irrespective of the circumstances surrounding the death. It is easy to make snap judgements around difficult situations – when a young person has died from suicide for example or substance misuse – but all efforts should be made to react in a way that is empathetic and non-judgemental. Death from suicide can result in social stigma and bereaved families can feel very isolated. A death from suicide upsets a community and can incorrectly be viewed as selfish. Some individuals see it as a moral wrong – and it is therefore very important that students, struggling to come to terms with what has happened, are not burdened with unhelpful opinions that could be very damaging.

## **When a child dies from murder or manslaughter**

When a child dies it is very upsetting, but when it is at the hands of another, the pain and distress of the loss is intensified. Surviving students will struggle to make any sense of events – and, as they try to process what has happened, they could be thrust into unwanted media attention, a criminal investigation, formal procedures such as trials, and inquests which will all put immense strain on the school community. There could be a barrage of pressure through social media. Students may suffer from “survivor guilt” or feel extreme anxiety about the perpetrator of the crime returning – imagining that they themselves are at risk. Grief is

bewildering for them, especially as there are often no logical answers to the questions haunting them. Staff should try to answer questions and concerns in an age appropriate way, with honest compassion and give reassurance that the child is not facing all of this alone. Staff should reassure students and strive to quash any rumours through continued good communication and support. Specialist counselling may be required for the whole school community at this time.

## **The Compassionate Friends**

The Compassionate Friends (TCF), a charity for bereaved parents and their families offer support from those similarly bereaved. We have produced this leaflet to offer practical suggestions to help your school or college in the worst circumstances.

We hope that it has helped your school cope with some of issues related to the death of one of your students. Grief is a complex response to loss and triggers strong emotions. Students affected by grief will remember and value all of their lives those people who offered them the right support and treated them with sensitivity and compassion. Bereaved parents (and grandparents) also really appreciate the thoughtfulness, planning and effort invested into the care of their surviving children, at a time of great distress for all in their family.



For further information about TCF please visit our web site or contact our national office (details overleaf).

# The Compassionate Friends

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## **TCF Postal Library**

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