



The Compassionate Friends

When a Pupil or Student Dies Suggestions for Schools and Colleges

The Compassionate Friends is a national charity supporting parents and siblings who are bereaved through child loss. This leaflet has been written by parents who have lost children of all ages in the hope that our insights can help in your interactions with bereaved families whose child or children attend your school or college.

When a Pupil or Student Dies

Suggestions for Schools and Colleges

To lose a child is a parent's worst nightmare. No matter their age, or the circumstances, grieving parents will be heartbroken. Surviving siblings will also be greatly disturbed.

Of course, it is not only the family who are affected. 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. When a child in the school community dies, there is a deep sense of shock for both classmates and the wider school population, including staff. In such sad circumstances, schools have a vital role to play in offering assistance and support both to bereaved families and siblings, as well as to friends and classmates.

This leaflet has been written by parents who have lost children of all ages in the hope that our insights can help in your interactions with bereaved families whose child or children has attended your school or college.

Terms used in this leaflet: For simplicity, we use pupil to refer to a child or teenager of any age. We use school for any educational establishment, including schools of all levels and further education colleges.

School responses to the death of one or more pupils

The main focus of this leaflet is on the relationship between the school and the bereaved family. Other organisations have put together some excellent suggestions and practical advice on supporting the pupil population. Please see any of these links for more information:

www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/for-schools

www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-schools/

www.childbereavementuk.org/for-schools

For your reference, here are a few crucial points.

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 in place, and some Local Education Authorities (LEAs) offer guidance and specific support.

The following are some key areas that need careful deliberation and action:

- **The Bereavement Policy** should cover systems for sharing information with all those who had contact with the deceased pupil. It is helpful to have a key member of staff take direct responsibility for talking to the pupils, to be available when needed, to make crisis contingency arrangements, and to pass on information to relevant people.
- **Communications:** In the case of a sudden death it is important to tell all pupils and staff what has happened so that rumours are dispelled and everyone is in possession of the facts. A class, year group, or whole-school assembly may be the most appropriate way to do this, but this should be done with the express permission of the family and only information that the family agrees to should be shared (please see below for more on this).
- A short and respectful statement could be posted on the **school's website and/or social media pages**, again with the bereaved family's approval, including a request that media respect the privacy of the family and the school community. In an age where children widely use social media, a fast response is important.
- Consider the need to **communicate with parents**, informing them of the situation and alerting them to the distress their children may be suffering.
- **Pastoral and emotional support** may be needed for those most closely affected. **Classmates**, especially close friends of the pupil who died, will suffer varying grief reactions. Their **teachers** may also need the support of colleagues at this time; they might need to be reassured that their ideas for giving comfort to the pupils 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.
- Strategies need to be prepared and implemented 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 deal with all

media enquiries. This member of staff may also make a formal press release with the permission and agreement of the family (and Head Teacher, depending on your school's policy) if there is no support from the LEA.

- Thought should be given to the attendance of pupils (where age appropriate) and staff at **the funeral** in accordance with the wishes of the bereaved relatives.
- Consider organising an occasion when the **school community can come together** to remember, mourn and celebrate the life of the individual(s). Again, this should be in consultation with the bereaved family.
- Families may wish to establish some type of permanent memorial for their child(ren), or will welcome a special place to **ensure remembrance in the future**. This can be arranged in consultation with the bereaved family (see below for more information).

The parents of the pupil who has died

All deaths bring sadness and grief, none more so perhaps than that of a child. In some cases, a parent may have anticipated the loss of their son or daughter, having cared for their child through an illness or disability. Other losses are sudden, such as following a road traffic accident or suicide.

Even if the death was expected it is likely that the parent will be in a state of shock and struggle to find a way forward. The parent is experiencing their worst nightmare, and their loss is likely to have a profound impact on them.

Initially parents may feel as though they are in a 'fog'. In the immediate aftermath of the death of their child, the parents will often be exhausted and in a state of disbelief. Nevertheless, they will be faced with the sheer practicalities of the situation, arranging the funeral, and so on.

Parents may be dealing with matters according to particular cultural or religious traditions. They may have a good network of support or, particularly if they are a lone parent, might be trying to manage things alone. For some, there are financial worries as to how to manage the costs of the funeral. There is more information on this here: www.tcf.org.uk/preparingourchildsfuneral

Taking all of this consideration, the following may be helpful:

- Immediate and ongoing communication from the school to the parents is encouraged. It could start with a phone call and/or a short hand-written card and flowers to the parental home. A visit to the family's home may be appropriate.

- With the family's agreement, school staff and even some pupils may wish to attend the funeral. A teacher who was close to the pupil might want to say a few words about them on this occasion.
- Bereaved parents want their child to be remembered. Anything you can do to celebrate the child and use their name will usually be welcomed. You might consider opening a book of remembrance at the school, in which staff and pupils can write messages of support and memories of the deceased pupil. The bereaved family may find it a great comfort to read these messages.
- Items belonging to their child may be precious to the parents – every book, drawing or piece of schoolwork. You may want to gather these together and put them safely into a box or nice bags to be given to the parents when they are ready to collect, which may not be for a while. There may also be gym clothes or the contents of a locker that will need to be given to the parents. Please do treat the child's belongings with respect and avoid putting them into plastic bags, much less bin bags, which could be quite hurtful for the parents.
- For many parents, returning to the school to collect their child's belongings can be very emotional and might be delayed. On the other hand, if they have other children who attend the school, visiting the school will be unavoidable. Doing so without all of their children present will be upsetting. Your patience with parents in this situation will be appreciated.
- Should there be occasions on which the family of the child who has died need to come into the school - for example, if their child died before collecting exam results and the family want to be present in school to collect their results - do ensure that a supportive member of staff is on hand to facilitate the visit and make sure there is a quiet, private space for the family to be if needed.
- Some parents may have concerns about things they believe were going on within the school prior to their child's death, such as bullying, self-harm or substance use. It is important to make an opportunity for an appropriate member of staff to meet with the parents and discuss these issues, if they wish.
- Let bereaved parents know about The Compassionate Friends. A phone call to our **Helpline (0345 123 2304)** or a visit to our website at **www.tcf.org.uk**, by you or them, will put them in touch with all of our services, provided at no cost to bereaved parents.

Examples of school actions appreciated by bereaved parents:

- A book made by classmates, with written memories and pictures.
- A personalised folder with all of their child's work in.
- A CD with school photos and videos of their child.
- Exam results and certificates delivered privately.
- Involvement in an assembly or memorial service.
- A bench dedicated in remembrance.
- A tree planted in memory and decorated by pupils.
- The parents' wishes, including those that fund-raise on behalf of the school, acknowledged and supported, such as creating an award, setting up play equipment or dedicating a facility in their child's name.
- An invitation to the end-of-the-year prize-giving, but not feeling obligated to attend.

Causes of death and the spread of news

The pupil's death may become public knowledge quite quickly, particularly if it was a sudden death, the result of violent crime or even unexplained. This may be via the 'rumour mill', mainstream media, and/or quite likely through social media.

For this reason, it is vital to speak with the parents as soon as is practical to find out their wishes about how they would like their child's death explained. It is important to respect their wishes where possible, although the matter can quickly get out of the school's control.

Managing the conversation within the school environment is beyond the scope of this leaflet, but it is worthwhile mentioning several of the most difficult situations:

A death from suicide upsets a community and can create an understandable concern about 'copycat' deaths. There can be some social stigma attached. Other parents may become fearful and avoid the bereaved family, which will leave them feeling very isolated.

Death as a result of substance use, self-destructive or dangerous behaviours can elicit similar responses from peers and/or other parents. A bereaved family desperately need compassion irrespective of the circumstances surrounding the death. It is easy

to make snap judgements around difficult situations, but all efforts should be made to react in a way that is empathetic and non-judgemental.

The sudden death of a pupil as result of an accident or violent crime is shocking for everyone. The pupil's friends and/or the school itself may enter an unwanted media spotlight. There could be a barrage of pressure through social media. Students may suffer from "survivor guilt" or feel extreme anxiety, and other parents may also react fearfully. Again, it is important to treat the bereaved family with kindness.

You might consider talking to pupils about how they discuss and post about the news on their social media platforms, helping them to understand the impact that sharing misinformation, rumours or disturbing details of the death could have on the bereaved family, not to mention any investigation into the death.

Pupils may want to contact the family of the pupil who has died. You could consider, if the bereaved family agrees, nominating a member of staff to pass on any messages/cards of support from pupils to the bereaved family, so that they are not overwhelmed by pupils getting in touch. On the other hand, the bereaved family may express that they would prefer their child's friends who want to, to get in touch. As ever, you should be guided by the family on the best way forward.

In your conversations with the bereaved parents, avoid mentioning the emotional and/or developmental impacts of their child's death upon other school pupils. The parents will already be feeling shattered; to be told that other children are being adversely affected would only make things worse.

It may be appropriate to give other parents some guidance on what to do if and when they see the deceased child's siblings or their parents, for example, at the school gates. Some bereaved parents may not want to be approached in the early days due to their overwhelming emotions.

From a parent: "A beautiful letter was sent home with all the children in the school, explaining briefly what had happened and how our child had touched everyone's lives, how missed he will be, that he will always be a part of the school family, and that support is available for them if needed. In this way, everyone, including the other parents, were made aware."

Surviving siblings in your school

If the deceased pupil had siblings who attend your school or college, then they will need special consideration. Some siblings may return almost immediately; others might take longer.

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 may 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 bullied.

On the pupil'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 pupil first returns to the classroom, they may suffer with 'separation anxiety' as they leave their 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. It is also essential not to draw too much unwanted attention to the pupil, for example by calling them out of class to speak with them. They may already be feeling self-conscious about their return to school without worrying that their classmates are talking about them behind their back.

Once the bereaved sibling returns to school, it is helpful to share concerns with their parents so that they know how he or she is coping. In primary school a home/ school diary can be a good method of communication.

School routines should be kept as normal as possible for the bereaved sibling; in fact, they could provide some relief from any emotional turmoil at home. On the other hand, the child's attendance and school work may be negatively affected by their grief, and some allowances will need to be made.

There will be some events in the school year that may be difficult. Significant anniversaries will be hard as bereaved families cope with their deceased child's birthday, for example. Christmas and other religious festivals and family gatherings highlight the hole left by their missing brother or sister and showing compassion at these times is important.

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. It would also be helpful for teachers to be sensitive about the timing of certain elements of the curriculum, as some subjects may be difficult for some children, for example discussing beliefs about death in Religious Studies classes.

Some schools provide bereaved siblings with a 'get out of class card', which means should the pupil feel upset, they can flash the card and leave the room without having to explain why.

The impact on siblings

Staff should be mindful that some bereaved pupils may feel shame or guilt as a result of the death of their sibling. Where possible staff should offer the child reassurance that they were not to 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 will continue to be important, though it may be less direct or frequent when children are older. When the bereavement is recent, the taking of some exams may need to be postponed until a pupil is better able to cope with the additional stress. Extra support or time to complete course work could be considered.

Long-term awareness and communication are necessary as the bereaved sibling progresses through the school, especially when large numbers of staff are involved. 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 the surviving children get older, they should be given the final say regarding how and which people are told about the death of their sibling. Although it is an important part of their life no child wants to be known solely as 'the child whose sibling died.'

Winston's Wish (www.winstonswish.org) and **Grief Encounter (www.griefencounter.org.uk)** are two of several charities that give support to children who are grieving siblings.

The Compassionate Friends has a support group for bereaved siblings aged 18 and over. See www.tcf.org.uk/siblings

Supporting the bereaved family, going forward

Every family is different and will need different support at different times. Please be guided by the parents and surviving children, and also include the grandparents and extended family as they are grieving too.

The desire for their child to be remembered and their memory celebrated is almost universal amongst grieving parents, and for many, their child's school can be a focus for their efforts regarding this. Parents may want to plant a tree, donate books, dedicate a prize, set up a Trust fund, put up a plaque and so on. If the pupil who has died had a particular talent or interest, the school community might consider fundraising for a space in the school (such as an IT suite or a dance studio) to be dedicated in their name. Anything that the school can do to facilitate these wishes will be welcomed.

The classmates and friends of the pupil who died may wish to get involved with planning or fundraising efforts, and this will give them a positive focus for their grief.

The school may wish to consider holding a special assembly and/or a commemoration on the first anniversary (there are more suggestions for this type of supportive activity in the links to other organisations on the first page of the leaflet).

As the years pass, their child's peers will eventually leave the school behind. For the bereaved parents, however, their child has been 'frozen in time,' and staff should not be surprised if they wish to continue interacting with the school. A tree that was planted in their child's memory will be visited over and over again, perhaps for many years. A prize dedicated to their child could be awarded annually, with the family invited to the awards ceremony each time.

Thank you for reading this leaflet. We hope it has helped shine a light on some of the issues related to the death of one of your pupils. Grief is a complex response to loss and triggers strong emotions. Bereaved parents and grandparents really appreciate the consideration shown to them and their child's memory, along with the thoughtfulness and effort invested in the care of their surviving children at a time of great distress for all in their family. How you handle this difficult situation can make a positive difference as they cope with the death of their child, brother or sister.

Further reading

TCF publishes over 30 leaflets on different aspects of grief which follow the death of a child. Although primarily addressed to parents and/or siblings, you may also find some titles useful. You can access them here: www.tcf.org.uk/leaflets

Who are the Compassionate Friends?

The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a charitable organisation of bereaved parents, siblings and grandparents dedicated to the support and care of other similarly bereaved family members who have suffered the death of a child or children of any age and from any cause.

We offer support both directly to bereaved families and indirectly by fostering understanding and good practice amongst professionals concerned with child death and by increasing public awareness. In TCF, "family" covers a broad spectrum of relationships. We aim to help any individual or family affected by the death of a child, including adoptive parents, step families, same sex couples and single parent families.

TCF has no religious affiliation and offers support to bereaved families irrespective of the age of the child, cause of death, ethnic, social or political background.



The Compassionate Friends

UK Helpline:
0345 123 2304

General Enquiries
0345 120 3785
E: info@tcf.org.uk

Northern Ireland Helpline:
0288 77 88 016

TCF Library
0345 120 3785
E: library@tcf.org.uk

To find out more about TCF visit

www.tcf.org.uk |  [@tcf.org.uk](https://www.facebook.com/tcf.org.uk)  [@saytheirname](https://twitter.com/saytheirname)



This leaflet has been sponsored by Bellevue Place Education Trust (BPET). BPET runs primary schools in London and the South East of England offering outstanding education and pastoral care to children. The Trust are delighted to be supporting the work of The Compassionate Friends in caring for and offering hope to families bereaved of a son or daughter.

Founder: The Revd Canon Dr Simon Stephens OBE

President: The Countess Mountbatten of Burma

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