



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR
Roinn an Fhoghlaim
Department of Education

Ag Amas air Adhartas - Aiming for Advancement

**SUPPORT
FOR BEREAVEMENT
POLICY**

October 2007

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1 Policy Leader: Head of Service for Inclusion

2 Rationale

- 2.1 This policy has been prepared for members of staff who are faced with children who have been bereaved. It is not designed to make anyone into specialist counsellors but tries to address the very practical questions that are likely to face a member of staff in this situation.
- 2.2 Children are all different and they will all react to a bereavement in their own way. The difference in their levels of awareness, understanding, age, emotional maturity, security and their relationship with the deceased will have significant effects.

3 Context

- 3.1 Bereavement can have a profound effect on a whole school and on individuals within the school. Because of the seriousness of bereavement, and the fact that it often occurs unexpectedly, it is wise for a school to have contingency plans for dealing with cases of bereavement.
- 3.2 In common with other PSD work already done in schools, bereavement issues should be approached several times in the course of primary and secondary education, each time building on what has been introduced before.

4 Aims

- 4.1 The school aims to be a positive influence on the grieving process, a place that both child and family can rely on and where they can receive support. In such circumstances the whole school community will work together with outside agencies, as appropriate, to provide this support.
- 4.2 This policy aims to provide a framework within which all staff can work to respond to instances of bereavement and gives guidance on how to deal sensitively and compassionately with individuals in difficult and upsetting circumstances.

5 Common Reactions in Adults and Children

- 5.1 Adults and children tend to respond in broadly similar ways to grief and bereavement. The response of individuals will depend on what has occurred, their degree of involvement with it and their own personality and coping skills. For adults, reactions may be manifested by symptoms such as:

- tiredness
- sleep disturbance
- tension
- menstrual irregularity
- difficulty in concentrating
- intolerance

- shaking
- tearfulness
- irritability
- loss of appetite
- headaches
- depression
- nausea
- memory difficulties
- increased sensitivity.

5.2 As well as the above reactions, children may also display the following:

- increased misbehaviour and acting younger
- pretend play and acting out the traumatic incident
- sleep disturbance including fear of the dark or of being alone
- clinging behaviour with parents
- preoccupation with the traumatic event
- difficulty concentrating in school
- heightened alertness to danger, including sensitivity to loud noises
- changes in appetite
- fears for their own safety or for that of family and friends
- reluctance to talk.

6 Guiding Principles

- 6.1 If a child feels secure with a particular teacher, it is likely that they will come to that teacher specifically for comfort or enlightenment and it is important that the teacher has given some thought as to how he/she should respond. Children and even older teenagers see things in terms of black and white. The result is that their questions may be disconcertingly blunt and the teacher may find himself/herself upset by the form of the question, or the inability to answer it.
- 6.2 A natural instinct may be to protect a child from the magnitude of his or her loss. It is probably wiser for the teacher to present reality as it is.
- 6.3 The child/children should be told as soon as possible that a person has died to prevent him/her learning from some other and often inappropriate source. The teacher should use a normal tone of voice and clear direct language and avoid hushed whispers which may convey unnatural and spooky feelings.
- 6.4 Whenever possible, children should be told by someone close to them, in familiar surroundings where the child will feel more secure.
- 6.5 Some schools may prefer to have one nominated person in charge. This person could then be trained. It is still best, depending on the size of the school, that this person is acquainted with all the children in the school.
- 6.6 It is important to tell the truth as far as you know it. Even white lies will have to be renegotiated later.

Children will vary in their ability at any one time to take in particular explanations. If the information is limited, the teacher should tell what he/she knows and then make every effort to find out more.

- 6.7 It is very important to let children know that it is natural and acceptable, even for adults, to be upset and to cry. It is better to share feelings rather than to deny them. Sometimes, however, it may be better to protect a child from the extreme grief reactions and adults who are prostrate with grief may need some time and space initially to release their most extreme reactions.
- 6.8 The teacher should encourage the child to ask questions and should tailor his/her answers to the child's level of understanding, within his/her home religion or culture and the teacher's own belief system.
- 6.9 It is important that teachers/adults do not force children to behave in a prescribed manner. Some children may have been brought up not to show their emotions. 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.
- 6.10 There are several phases of grief. The initial stage of disbelief usually passes quickly, but many individuals are in this stage for some considerable time. The feelings of depression 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 such as in a class reacting to the death of one of their peers since they will all be at different stages at the same time and it should be allowed to run its natural course.
- 6.11 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 such as bedwetting and/or nightmares and should be reassured and comforted. Other very vulnerable children are those from already insecure backgrounds such as broken families, marital instability etc, and these children may have severe reactions to the new loss. All children need to come to terms with the loss and the aim is to provide support and comfort so that the trauma is gradually overcome, rather than its remaining as a permanent block to their emotional development.
- 6.12 Traumatic death. Children who have witnessed a dramatic death or deaths, or who have been involved in a disaster or other trauma, may need specialised assistance. Parents and schools too may need help.
- 6.13 All cultures and religions seem to acknowledge that bereavement exists and in most cases the emotions of grief are similar. However, staff need to be aware that mourning rituals differ widely. For example, in some instances the length of time between death and burial can vary enormously.

7 The Overall Message in Helping Bereaved Children

- try to maintain feelings of security, of being cared for and valued.
- maintain all the necessary practical care.
- be honest at the child's level of understanding.
- continue to talk and communicate.
- do not pretend to believe what you do not believe.
- do not be afraid to share your own feelings.
- remember there are others who can help.
- do not be afraid to admit to colleagues, family and managers that you cannot cope at any particular time.

8 Other Crises

8.1 There are other crises which can have an effect on pupils. Many people tend to associate bereavement with a permanent deprivation of a loved one through their death. However, it is worthwhile remembering that for many children there are other losses which may be experienced as though it were a bereavement. The emotional and behavioural outcomes can be similar to those in the bereavement process. Examples could include the following:

- divorce
- changing schools
- death of a pet
- parent in prison
- disabled or seriously ill sibling
- parent returning to paid employment
- parent changing jobs.
- violence, sexual harassment
- drug problems
- hospital stay
- children in care.

8.2 These situations may not affect the whole of the class but it can to a large extent affect individual pupil performance in class. It would be very demanding to create a specific contingency plan for each situation but in general the initial response to an upset child should be, as is normally the case, to identify the source of the distress, the child's response and the support required with the assistance of various specialists such as educational psychologists, school health visitor, external sources. The normal referral routes should apply but, in general, consideration should be given to the following:

- what support can the child expect at home?
- what can teachers do?
- does the situation demand the involvement of the whole class?
- would a visit to the home or a meeting with the parents be useful?
- does the pupil have close, supportive friends?
- should external agencies be contacted?

9 Procedures

9.1 When a death occurs outside of school (eg illness, accident, suicide, murder)

9.1.1 An immediate action plan will include:

- the development of routines which ensure that the headteacher is informed by parents or other authorities such as police, hospital.
- the headteacher verifies information about the child's death before informing teachers and classmates. The headteacher gathers as many facts as possible about the event from parents and others (police, fire brigade, hospital). Information should be gathered:
 - *when, where and how it happened?*
 - *were other pupils present?*
 - *where is the child now?*
- the headteacher takes responsibility for providing relevant information to
 - *teacher /staff.*
 - *class and other pupils, assisted by teacher, for death notification.*
- the plan for the rest of the day is activated to include support in the classroom.
- if the press approach, they should be referred to the Comhairle's press officer and affected family, classmates and staff should be shielded.
- a meeting should be held to discuss plans for the next day. All teachers in classes affected by the death should attend if appropriate.

9.2 When a pupil's parent or sibling dies

9.2.1 In the case of a death in the child's closest family, the headteacher should be informed. If the death happens while the child is at school, a representative for the family, preferably a parent, should come to the school to inform the child. In many circumstances, a teacher will have to give the death notification.

9.2.2 Before notifying fellow pupils, the class teacher should speak with the bereaved child to determine what information should be given to his/her classmates and in what form. Some children prefer to be absent while this information is given whilst others want to be present. It is helpful if classmates are informed as to how their bereaved classmate wishes to deal with what has happened such as by speaking openly and taking the initiative, or letting the bereaved child decide when he/she wants to talk.

9.2.3 It is a symbolic gesture to the bereaved child and the family if a representative of the school, preferably the class teacher, is present at the funeral. The teacher can also encourage the bereaved child's closest friends to attend the funeral.

- 9.2.4 Following the death of a parent, the teacher must accept a longer period of adjustment on the part of the child with a consequent reduced capacity for school work.
- 9.2.5 As a consequence the bereaved child may need extra help at a later time, when working capacity becomes normal again.
- 9.2.6 Let the child decide how much he/she wants to talk about what happened, but let the child know that you are willing to listen if he/she wishes to discuss the situation.

9.3 The death of a member of staff

- If the death happens suddenly and unexpectedly, arrange for a meeting where colleagues can talk through what has happened.
- Try to establish continuity in the classroom as soon as possible. The supply teacher or member of staff should be informed properly on how pupils and other staff were affected and which ones were most distressed. This member of staff will require support.
- In the case of the class teacher, if appropriate, let some of the children attend the funeral, accompanied by trusted adults.

10 Partnership with Parents and the Community

- 10.1 It is important to stress the importance of communication between school and home. For both children and adults it is their family, friends and colleagues who will provide the most appropriate and effective sources of help and support. External sources of support should complement these sources of support.

11 Quality Assurance

11.1 Implementation

The school recognises the need to provide training and strategies for staff. It also acknowledges that bereavement and the experience of mourning are complex and personal and that staff should be allowed to decide on their own level of involvement.

11.2 Monitoring and Self Evaluation

Promoted staff have responsibility for monitoring the implementation of this policy throughout the school. Specific responsibility will lie with the named person at the beginning of this policy.

11.3 Review of the Policy

Review will take place according to the priorities identified in the school development plan.

APPENDIX 1

Resources

There are many resources available. You can find a full list on some websites like the ones detailed below. You will also find many useful resources in the pamphlet 'Supporting Bereaved Young People (SCRE)'

- Supporting Bereaved Young People. SCRE – for 12–18 year olds.
- Cruse Bereavement Care (www.Crusebereavementcare.org.uk).
- The Child Bereavement Trust. www.Childbereavement.org.uk.
- The Ten Good things about Barney. J Viorst (Collins 1971).
- Badger's Parting Gifts, S Varley. (Picture Lions, Collins).
- My Old Grandad. W Harranth. (Oxford University Press).
- When Uncle Bob died. Althea. (Dinosaur Publications).
- Leila. S Alexander. (Hamish Hamilton, Penguin).
- The Selkie Girl. S Cooper. (Hotter and Stoughton).
- The Very Hungry Caterpillar. E Carle Hamish Hamilton.
- Water bugs and Dragonflies. D Stickney. (Mowbray).
- The Sand Horse. A Turnbull. (Andersen Press).
- The Day the Sea Went out and Never Returned. Margaret Sunderland.
- Help Me Say Goodbye. Janis Silverman (Fairview Press).
- The Anatomy of Bereavement. B Raphael. (Hutchinson).
- The Private Worlds of Dying Children. Bluebond-Langer. Princeton University Press.
- Giving Sorrow Words (for In-service). Steven Killick and Stuart Lindeman – Lucky Duck Publishing - www.Luckyduck.co.uk.
- When a Child Grieves. Video available from Child Bereavement Trust.
- Freddy the Leaf. Details from the Scottish Central Film Library, Glasgow.
- When Someone Dies – how schools can help - available from Cruse.
- Coping with Bereavement – A Handbook for Teachers. John Holland. Cardiff University Press.
- Helping Children cope with Grief. Rosemary Wells (Sheldon Press).
- Drawing out Feelings (Activity Pack) Marge Heegard – for six to twelve year olds – available from Cruse.
- Good Grief 1 (for Primary) Barbara Ward (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) Teacher's Pack with classroom resources.
- Good Grief 2. (for Secondary). As above with Good Grief 1.

Signed: _____

Date : _____

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