

OAKDENE PRIMARY SCHOOL

BEREAVEMENT POLICY



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Bereavement Policy / Guiding Principles

Introduction

Bereavement is an experience which will be faced by all members of a school community at some point. It will be a more difficult experience when the loss is of a member of that school community – a child, a staff member, Governor or a parent/carer.

Bereavement is an issue to be addressed openly with a clear and consistent approach by all across both home and school.

Adults and pupil's benefit from being kept informed of a death. Rumour, lack of facts or avoidance can be very damaging and can lead to an attitude that death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity and if they are not informed of the circumstances or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be obstructed. It is important that everyone reads and follows the policy to support the same approach.

This policy will deal with bereavement following the death of a school pupil, staff member, Governor or parent/carer.

Aims

The aim of this policy is to provide a consistent framework to staff for the management of very difficult circumstances with sensitivity, empathy and compassion. This should enable children and staff to feel supported, in school, their safe place. This policy will offer advice, support and guidance in managing the situation both at home and at school and with other professionals who may be required to support staff and children in school. This policy aims to provide guidance to adults and children in drawing upon a range of techniques that allows every person their own way in managing their own grief.

Circumstances of a pandemic

Currently the world has been affected by a major pandemic (COVID-19) and in light of this schools and settings need to be prepared for dealing with a huge impact on their school communities of potentially a high number of deaths of children, parents, grandparents and extended family members. In this way many children and their families will be experiencing grief and trauma at the same time. It is vital that alongside individual circumstances for individual children and families, that schools consider how they can support the whole school community through curriculum support in school for each year group as well as access to mental health support.

Notification of the death of a child

There may be a number of ways that a school will be informed of the death of the child. Where possible this should be via parents/carers of the child or another family member. The school may receive notification from a hospital, a police officer, a social worker or a member of the community. The person informing the school should ask to speak to the Executive Headteacher, Head of School or member of the Senior Leadership Team.

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The Executive Headteacher/SLT will seek to gain minimal but appropriate, factual information of what has occurred, with empathy and support, in order to be able to share factual information appropriately with the rest of the school community. This should include, a synopsis of what has happened (e.g. a lead up to an illness such as cancer or an accident/incident), when it occurred and any information that the person informing wishes to be known (parents may want to include any request of the school, or information about the child, such as something they would like the school to do). The Executive Headteacher will seek to agree further contact with the family and how they would like that to be managed including from other parents/carers within the school who wish to offer condolences as well as around future contact regarding funeral arrangements.

Notification of the death of a member of staff

As above, a school may receive information from either the partner, parent or family member of the member of staff. The information should be gathered in the same way alongside agreement of further contact with the family. The Executive Headteacher will need to inform the Local Authority (maintained schools) and their Human Resources Provider.

Notification of the death of a Governor

As above, a school may receive information from either the partner, parent or family member of the member of staff. The information should be gathered in the same way alongside agreement of further contact with the family. The Executive Headteacher will need to inform the Local Authority and Governor Support Team.

Notification of the death of a parent/carer

As above, a school may receive information from either the partner, grandparent or other family member of the parent/carer. The information should also be gathered in the same way alongside agreement of further contact with the family. The Executive Headteacher will discuss the plan for the child or children of the deceased. It may be that the child returns to school the next day and an appropriate plan of support will be required, including an understanding of what the child knows about what has happened and the level of intervention that may be required.

Notification of the death of an extended family member

As above, school may receive information from either of the parents of the child or extended family members. Information should be gathered in a way that will support the child, siblings or cousins in school and a plan will be made by the Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team in supporting all of those affected by the death.

Informing staff and governors

As soon as possible, staff and governors need to be informed of the death (either child, staff member, parent/carer or governor). The Executive Headteacher/SLT will arrange a meeting/bubble briefing to be held as soon as possible with relevant staff. The views and wishes of the family members will be discussed, alongside the facts of what has occurred. School leaders will agree the 'script' of what should be repeated to children and their parents/carers

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should any questions be asked. This 'script' may be required if there is any media attention surrounding the death e.g. a murder, domestic violence/abuse a fatal accident. In these circumstances, less is more, stick to the facts and have a statement of no more than 3-4 sentences. If staff are approached by individuals outside of school, they should refer to the statement and ask individuals to contact the Executive Headteacher directly. All staff and governors will refrain from any discussion via mobile, text messages and social media and direct any accounts they may see online directly to the Executive Headteacher.

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team will be prepared to support the grief of all staff, particularly those closest to the child or member of staff. This will not be underestimated. Grief can impact on people differently and particularly those who may have recently been bereaved within their own families. Arrangements will be made to manage and support those members of staff who may find it most difficult and may need to go home straight away. Clear plans will be put in place for staff who may require counselling or assistance in continuing their role. This is a whole school approach to managing a death within the school community.

As soon as possible the Executive Headteacher will inform the Chair of Governors and the governing body of the death and the actions and contingency plans the school has put in place to support children and staff.

Informing Children

There are many options to consider and this will be led on an individual basis. For example, the child or sibling may want to inform their class of what has happened if it is regarding their parent/carer/family member or sibling (where appropriate given the age of the child).

However, where possible the children who are in the same class as either the child or staff member who has died should be informed first. This could be done in small groups, by known adults of the children. Staff should use the 'script' agreed in the staff meeting to reduce any ambiguity. Although everyone may have a different view of language, faith and afterlife, it is important to not allow children to have any confusion. For example, saying someone has 'passed away' could be misunderstood by a child.

Instead it should be, 'XX has died. That means we won't see them again.' Use concrete factual language wherever possible to reduce confusion and possible anxiety for children. This is where the views of the parents and family is important, if the family do not believe in heaven then this language should not be used. However, if subsequently asked those questions by children staff could say, 'some people say..... that they have gone to heaven'. Clarity is imperative here for children to understand and not feel scared. Children will be informed that they can ask any questions now or in the coming days and weeks and staff should continue to check in with all children with continued reassurance.

The rest of the children in school should then be informed (again either by child/sibling if appropriate), again using the facts and the 'script' agreed. Staff should maintain an 'open door' for any child who may find the situation difficult even if they did not know the child or staff member very well.

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The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team will have a plan of support in place including intervention from the Care Team or in-house/external counselling, open door policies for children to come and speak to staff, worry boxes, email support etc. Staff will be informed of how they can contribute and support any child who may be distressed.

Informing Parents

Once staff and children are informed, the Headteacher will draft a letter to parents (appendix A) to inform them of what has happened. The letter will state the information that is the 'script' and will request parents to contact the Executive Headteacher or Senior Leadership Team should they need to. The letter will request parents not to speculate, or question their children for more information and will ask parents to be respectful about what they share online. The letter should outline the family's wish for privacy and contact at this time.

The Executive Headteacher should consider how to share this letter so that all parents including hard to reach, or those with English as a second language should be able to receive it. Use of the school's communication policy will support in making sure the information is shared to everybody. The school may consider use of the School's website or other formats of communication to share information appropriately and in agreement with the family.

Informing other people

Dependent on the individual circumstances of the school the Executive Headteacher may need to inform other additional services including the SEN team, transport services, social care, medical support etc.

Managing the funeral

The Executive Headteacher will decide (if appropriate) who from the school will attend the funeral and how school will be managed in the absence of a number of staff. The Executive Headteacher should make the decision based on those staff who were closest to either the child or staff member who died. It may not be possible for every staff member to attend. Appropriate cover arrangements will be put in place to manage the absence of staff from school at this time. The Executive Headteacher or member of the SLT should be in attendance where appropriate.

In exceptional circumstances the school may make the decision to close for all those staff who wish to attend the funeral. This information needs to be shared quickly and effectively with parents/carers. Attendance at the funeral by children needs to be discussed depending upon the death of the individual. If pupils are to attend then they MUST be accompanied by a parent or carer. The school cannot be responsible for the supervision of pupils at a funeral.

Closure of a school in these circumstances would be the last resort but sometimes necessary for the safety of all and the decision should be made in discussion with the Chair of Governors and Senior Leadership Team and Local Authority.

For those who cannot attend the funeral, alternative arrangements may be made in school such as a memory table, memory tree or memory book. These will be able to be accessed throughout the school day and beyond for any staff member or child who wishes to pay tribute to the

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memory of the deceased, through writing down and reflecting on a memory. Small groups of children could meet with trusted staff to share their memories of the person who has died if this is deemed to be appropriate. In some ways this can provide a more controlled environment for children and staff in saying goodbye and to manage their grief in a safe space around known children and adults.

Guidance for language and scripts

As stated, language is important at this time particularly to reduce ambiguity and confusion for children. Discussion with the family and the staff at the earliest stage is imperative and the family's wishes and beliefs must be respected. Consistency between home and school can support a child with feeling secure in a changed world. Taking into consideration the family and the child's choices can be about allowing the family/child to have some control in a very changed world for them.

Below are some suggested scripts.

'I am sorry that I have some sad news to tell you today. XX has died. That means that we won't see them again.'

'XX was unwell/ill for a long time. They went to hospital but the doctors and nurses couldn't make them better and they died.'

'XX had an accident and when they went to hospital the doctors and nurses couldn't make them better and they died.'

'We have lots of wonderful memories of XX, over the next few days we can remember them and put them in our memory book in School'.

'This news might make you feel lots of different emotions, you might feel sad, scared or uncertain. It is really important that you are able to show your emotions and you can do that with any adult in school.'

'Please make sure if you feel sad or worried or your friend tells you that they do, that you come and find your trusted adult and talk to us. You might be worried that you will make us feel sad by talking about XX but our job in school is to keep you safe and make sure you don't have any worries.'

'In school we have made a safe space in the _____. If you would like to have some time to think there and remember XX it will be open at breaktime/lunchtime. We will also hold the memory book there so you can write down any memories you have of XX.'

Religion - It is important to respect the religion of both the family and the school but be mindful of how children may interpret a view of heaven (for example - fluffy clouds with the deceased on them could be a terrifying thought before going on an aeroplane).

Keep language and information simple and ensure that any view is not one sided:

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‘Some people say.... Heaven is where the soul/spirit of a person goes, their body stays on Earth and is buried or cremated.’

‘Your family believe...’

Funeral

‘A funeral is when the family of XX go to church or a crematorium to celebrate the life of XX and say goodbye.’

‘Funerals can be sad and sometimes overwhelming because of everyone’s emotions. That is why children do not always go and we can celebrate the life of XX at school in a different way.’

Questions

Be prepared for children to have many questions about what has happened and try to answer them as honestly as possible (they will hear lots of adult conversations that they are trying to interpret).

Suggested questions and responses

Where will XX go now? - See above about heaven, ensure clarity about body and soul if describing heaven.

Will I die now? – No, XX was unwell and the doctors and nurses couldn’t save them. You are not unwell; you are safe and well.

Will other people in my family die? – See above.

Will I see XX again? – No XX has died and that means we won’t see them again.

Support in School

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team will be managing the death as a critical incident and will therefore put in place identified support for both the children and staff. This may include a request for Educational Psychology to support the staff and children. It may also include use of any on site school counsellor or service in place in school. Support should be offered to those who require it. Staff and children will be notified on how and when they can access the support on offer.

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team will set up in school a way for the deceased person to be remembered and celebrated. As suggested above this may be a memory table, memory tree or memory book (or all three) in designated safe spaces in school. The school website may be set up with a message and ability for staff, /carers and children to post to which can be well managed and quality assured by the staff who manage the website. Staff and children should be informed of when they are able to access these opportunities.

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The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team may hold a special memorial assembly for the deceased after the funeral and family members should be invited to attend should they wish too.

Any individuals who require ongoing support following the death of the deceased should have an individual plan in place to support them with access to any additional resources necessary.

Support Outside of School

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team will continue to liaise with the family of the deceased to continue a relationship with the family and support any other siblings in school. If the deceased is a staff member, the family of the deceased should be invited in for any special memorials.

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team will continue to offer support for staff and children outside of school. This may include supporting parents and staff in making individual referrals for counselling for children or themselves.

Effective communication, working together and having a consistent approach in managing the effect of the death on children and adults can help to manage and support the grief that individuals may be experiencing.

Continued support and additional offers

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team should continue to support any child and staff member who requires support following the death of either a child, staff member or parent. That person's ongoing progress should be tracked and monitored and intervention put in place when required. For a child this may include behaviour support, peer support, emotional support or counselling etc. This should be led by the impact on the child and their willingness to engage in the support available, there can be no clear timetable for this.

Personal belongings and school work

It is so important to leave a child's/staff members personal belongings and work in the same place, as children will find this very supportive and also it can be distressing to remove everything too quickly. Consideration about when is the best time to return personal belongings to the family would usually be at the agreed time for change e.g. at the end of the half term or when the classroom display is usually changed or when pegs are reassigned. However, sometimes changing classrooms/staff room layouts are important after a death so the new layout means children or adults don't feel that they need to avoid certain areas for fear of upsetting someone.

The Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team should ensure that all personal belongings of the deceased are then stored for when the family would wish to receive those items which will be precious and memorable to them.

Rights Respecting Schools

Article 17 All children have the right to information.

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Appendix A – Suggested Letter to Parents

Dear Parents/Carers

We are very sad to inform you of the death of XX a child/staff member at XX School. The death was unexpected / XX had been unwell for a long time.

XX had been a pupil at X school for X years and was a much-loved member of the school community and will be missed by everyone that knew him/her. ADD ANY PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHILD THAT THE FAMILY WOULD LIKE TO SHARE.

XX had been a teacher/caretaker/TA/Office Manager for X years and was a much-loved member of the school community and will be missed by everyone that knew him/her. ADD ANY PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE STAFF MEMBER THAT THE FAMILY WOULD LIKE TO SHARE.

When someone dies it is normal for their friends and family to experience lots of emotions such as sadness, anger, confusion or worry. At X School we will continue to support our pupils, staff and community in managing this sad death. We will be talking to pupils and checking in with them regularly to ensure they feel supported and will try to answer their questions as honestly as we can.

The information and script we are giving is, 'INSERT AGREED SCRIPT'. We would ask that you support us at home by using the same language and consistency to help your child feel secure in managing their grief.

At school we have set up safe places in school which hold a memory table/memory book/memory tree and we are encouraging children to visit those areas should they need support or wish to write a memory of the deceased. Our staff are on hand to support any pupils in any way that they need and in school we also have X counselling support should your child require any one to one or individual intervention. We would ask that you continue to monitor your child at home and contact either the Executive Headteacher or a member of the Senior Leadership Team if you have any concerns for your child in managing what has happened. Our thoughts are with XX's family at this time. We will be holding a special assembly for XX after the arranged funeral. We respectfully request that you direct any queries or condolences through school rather than directly to the family at this time (unless you are close friends or family) as this can be overwhelming for the family. We also ask that you consider the impact of the use of any social media platforms to make any condolences to the family and ask you to respect their privacy at this time.

Yours sincerely,

Executive Headteacher
X School