



4th April 2019

Dear Parents

Tragic Loss – Important Information

This will be a long letter. As you read through it you will hopefully understand why it is so important that I include so much information. There is a possibility that if all our parents read and act on the advice given, it might save a life.

As such we would strongly appreciate you reading this letter and then sharing it with your children. We will pick up on this through our tutor and PSCHÉ programme in school but we feel this initial discussion must come from you as parents, unless you contact us to specifically request that we do this for you, sooner rather than later.

In the last few weeks we lost a Year 7 student in one of our schools (Burscough Priory Academy). The school community and our wider family have been understandably devastated by this loss. I have been humbled by the response of students, staff and our parents and couldn't be more grateful with the sensitivity and respect shown.

Local Rumours

We quickly became aware that there was a lot of discussions locally, and completely understandably, about this. There was, and still is, increasing speculation about the nature of her death. As things currently stand we do not know the facts, no matter what we may have been told or heard. It will only be at a formal inquest that this will be established. You may have heard talk of this in our local community yourselves.

In the meantime, we have become aware that our children are trying to make sense of these rumours. We are also seeing an alarming increase in the number of young and very young children taking their own lives. As such we feel it is essential that we address the wider issues that will be causing worry and distress. In doing this we are not confirming any link with our Year 7 student at Burscough, and it would be highly inappropriate for us to do so. We simply feel that this discussion is an opportunity for us to talk to our children about some very difficult topics.

Loss and Grief

We are all social beings and when we experience losses, these losses are social losses, losses of interactions and social relationships. When we grieve we grieve not only for the loss of the person who has died but also for the difference that this death has made to our future and life's possibilities.

When there is a death or loss people experience a range of emotions and thoughts in their grieving: shock, disbelief, denial, anger, and acceptance. Generally, these are considered as sequential, but in practical terms people can move, backwards and forwards between these emotions. People talk about

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'waves of grief' because they sometimes feel overcome and pushed back by feelings and emotions that they thought had passed.

In the situation we are in, it may be that they are not thinking about the student we have lost, it may be that it has thrown up thoughts of others who have died, other family or other tragic losses that they have never discussed. It may be that you as parents hadn't realised how deeply affected they were. This letter will hopefully give you a useful prompt to talk about this.

Because people are sociable they talk about life experiences and this is something that helps to interpret and reinterpret life events and give them meaning. Expressing our feelings to others about a loss and confiding feeling is important. It helps us to cope at times of major loss, and helps us to face up to and understand the impact of the loss.

Individuals differ in the extent to which they choose to give accounts of their loss and confide in others. Some people may confide in no one at all, or in a few people with whom they are particularly close. Some people prefer not to talk about their losses.

At home we would urge you to talk openly about what has happened and to ask your children about what they have heard and how they feel about this and death and dying in general.

If you feel unable to do this but you think your child does need to talk about it, then please don't hesitate to contact us. We are being supported by a range of professionals in school and we also have excellent staff within our school and our trust.

Loss and Suicide

Last week you may have heard on the news, that increasingly in young people, suicide is the biggest cause of death. This is also a very worrying and growing statistic for young people under the age of sixteen. When we talk about 'suicide' we technically mean that the person concerned has brought about their own death and had intended their life to end. This is why it is a difficult term to use, especially with younger people, because we will never fully know what the intention was. Having said this, it is the word that young people understand and does make these issues easier to address by using simple, straightforward language.

When people we know, or know of, take their own life it can lead to all kinds of reactions, all of which are perfectly natural. People are naturally curious when a tragic and unexplained event such as this happens and want to be sympathetic. However, knowing this can cause us further pain and distress and raise questions that we cannot answer.

When there is a suicide people try hard to make sense of what has happened but they may also feel shame and anger about what has happened. There are many reasons for this:

- Because it's so hard to understand why this might have happened
- Because you are concerned that somehow we should have prevented it
- Because you feel you should have noticed something
- Because you are unable to make sense of the death and are unsure about how to help others deal with the loss.
- Because you can't understand why somebody would put their family through that pain

In this situation, particularly as parents, it is important to give young people an opportunity to voice these thoughts and feelings and not feel judged. In this way we can work through the many emotions that can emerge in a safe environment. If you want us to talk to your child about this then don't hesitate to contact us.

As a parent it is one of our biggest fears and, because it is such a huge topic at the moment, we need to take this opportunity to discuss it with our children. This is partly to reassure ourselves, but also importantly to do everything we can to make sure we don't miss a chance to pick up on something that we may otherwise have missed.

How to Help Yourself and Others

When a situation like this occurs the specialist are keen for us to do the following:

- Accept that the complex reasons for the person taking their own life will probably never be known or understood and that 'making sense' of the death will never happen.
- Accept that when somebody has decided that they want to die, then it is unlikely that we could have done something to prevent the death and that the person was determined to end their life. Indeed, quite often when this is happened others will report how happy they seemed prior to it happening.
- Value and acknowledge the life of the person who has died.
- Be aware that time and looking forward to the future life will help.

Signs to look out for

Sometimes there may be signs that a young person is feeling suicidal; some signs are more obvious than others and some can be quite subtle. After all, some young people may not have the skills, confidence or language to describe how they feel. Therefore, we might need to pay a little more attention than usual. Alternatively, some young people may be more comfortable directly expressing their thoughts of suicide which will allow us to explore them further.

People thinking about suicide will often want/invite us to ask directly if suicide has become an option for them.

There is no exhaustive list of 'invitations' but changes in behaviour (loss of interest/withdrawal, giving away possessions), physical indicators (weight loss, lack of interest in appearance), expressing thoughts or feelings (hopeless, sad, guilty, worthless) and the words/language being used ("I can't take it anymore", "Everyone would be better off without me") could all be indicators that someone is experiencing thoughts of suicide.

Recent research has indicated that asking a young person if they are experiencing thoughts of suicide can actually reduce the risk of them ending their life. Asking if that person is feeling suicidal gives you the opportunity to explore those feelings further and support them to stay safe.

The most important thing to do to find out if someone is struggling with thoughts of suicide is to ask. If you are going to have the conversation, plan a time when you know you won't be interrupted, somewhere quiet and private and think carefully about who needs to be included in the conversation.

This letter is intended to give you a starting point to a general conversation about your child's thoughts around the topic that can then lead onto a conversation about times they may feel low or lost or left out. 'Have you ever thought about it?', or 'What are your thoughts about suicide?' or 'Why do you think people consider suicide, have you ever felt like that?' are some simple ways to start the conversation.

Again, if you feel uncomfortable doing this, or something comes up as a result of the conversation, don't hesitate to contact us.

Online Safety

One of the other rumours being circulated is that our Year 7 student was a victim of online bullying on Instagram. Again, we have not been told this by anybody officially involved and speculation as to whether this is true is distressing to those children who were 'friends' with her online.

What we do know is that most parents are completely unaware of their own children's online presence. Many children, for example, will have two Instagram accounts, one to show you so that you feel like you are monitoring this, and one which is hidden that is for their 'real' use. We will be reconvening an evening for you to attend which will help you navigate this online world that our children inhabit but in the meantime we would strongly advise the following:

- Make sure that you have the password to your child's phone and check that it is the correct password regularly. If they refuse to give you their password confiscate the phone as there should be no good reason to hide the content from you.
- Check your child's phone regularly, check the 'apps' they are on, if you can't access them insist they show you
- Don't let your child take their phone's up to bed at the end of the day
- Don't install computers or games machines in their bedrooms that give them online access

In addition to the information above you may find the following links helpful:

<https://papyrus-uk.org/>
stepbyshop@samaritans.org
www.orderline.dh.gov.uk
www.samaritans.org
www.nationalonlinesafety.com

As we have said throughout this letter, please don't feel alone in dealing with this and don't hesitate to contact us for any reason whatsoever. Nothing will be too much trouble.

Our very best wishes,

Mrs Gwinnett

Executive Head