


# Bereavement Policy



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## **Contents**

### **Section 1 - Introduction**

- **Rationale**
- **A child's reaction to bereavement**
- **Talking about death**
- **Support for Staff**

### **Section 2 - Supporting a bereaved pupil**

- **Returning to school after a bereavement**
- **Longer term support**
- **The Curriculum**

### **Section 3 - The death of a pupil**

- **Roles and responsibilities**
- **Procedures**
- **Remembering**

### **Section 4 - The death of a member of staff**

**Annex A:     Template letters to parents/carers after a death in the school community**

**Annex B:     Addendum to Bereavement Policy: Covid-19 Pandemic**

## **Section 1 – Introduction**

### **Rationale**

Bereavement can be experienced by any member of our school community at any time, whether that be as a result of the death of a parent/carer, a relative or indeed a member of staff or pupil of the school. In addition, bereavement can occur as the result of any separation within a family, e.g. divorce. Pupils need to be supported when they experience separation for whatever reason in the course of their lives while they are at school.

This policy is to provide guidance to senior leaders and school staff following a bereavement. The aim is to offer support to both pupils and adults, and for staff to have greater confidence in coping when a bereavement occurs. In addition, it is important for school leaders to know that when bereavement is more complex, for example following the sudden death of a member of staff or a pupil, that very often specialist support should be sought and it is important for leaders to know how to signpost this support dependent on the individual or group of individuals and how in fact the loss may be affecting them.

The loss of a pupil especially can be a very difficult time for the whole school community.

It is important to note that every death, and the circumstances in which it occurs, can be very different and this policy will attempt to guide us on how to deal professionally, sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances. We as a Trust and school are committed to the well-being and emotional health of our staff and pupils. We must support all our school community in coping with the loss of a loved one and ensure that our community has an ethos, environment and curriculum that support and prepare pupils for coping with bereavement. The policy has been written based on guidance from various sources such as, [Child Bereavement UK](#), [Winston's Wish](#), [Bereavement Advice](#) and [Child Bereavement Network](#), and indeed practice that has grown over time from school staff who have previously experienced bereavements in schools, and provides a resource as a working document to support our community.

### **A child's reaction to bereavement**

Children's reactions to bereavement are affected by many factors which may include; who has died, how they died, what their relationship was with the person who has died, how the rest of family respond, what other stresses are in their lives at the same time, and whether their school and home community are supportive. Age and 'maturity' are also important factors as to the child's understanding of what has happened and what the impact may be on them and others around them. This is the same for a family separation such as divorce.

Children can move through many emotions and reactions very quickly, sometimes described as 'puddle jumping', whereas adults may 'stay' with their grief much longer. Behaviour can be at times indicate extreme upset but then followed by appearing fine for a long period of time. 'Puddle-jumping' is their method of coping. Teenagers may show their emotions in many ways including periods of self-isolation.

Whatever way a child responds, it is important to help them understand what is happening to them and to talk about what is going on.

The psychologist Atle Dyregrov lists the following as some of the [common reactions among bereaved children](#):

- anxiety
- insecurity and worry about other family members
- vivid memories
- sleep difficulties
- sadness and longing
- anger and acting-out behaviour
- guilt, self-reproach and blame
- school difficulties
- physical health complaints

### Talking about death

Talking to a child about death can be difficult as adults will worry about upsetting the child even more or maybe frightening them by saying the wrong thing. However, talking to a child about death and answering their questions as honestly as possible is important. Often what children may be imagining may actually be much worse than reality.

Quite often the news of a death will be given by a parent/carer, but it is also important for school staff to be aware of some of the basic guidance on informing a child of a death. Simplicity and honesty are vital. [Guidance on how to inform a child of a death](#) and other resources can be found on [Child Bereavement UK](#).

- Use simple language
- Staff may need to explain to a very young child exactly what death means
- Staff should not be afraid to show feelings. It's ok to feel sad.
- Explain that death is normal
- Allow the child to express their grief
- Grief can be delayed
- Recognise each relationship is different and therefore reactions can be different

### Support for staff

When staff work alongside bereaved children it can also have an effect on them, whether that be through empathising with the pupil or indeed an experience which brings back memories of events in their own lives. Therefore, school leaders must ensure that 'front-line' staff who deal with safeguarding issues are supported. 'Supervision' mechanisms are important as well as staff training. It is useful to ensure at least one or two key pastoral/SEND staff have experienced relevant training on bereavement so that they can not only support pupils but also be better to cope with the feeling they may themselves experience.

In the event of the death of a pupil or member of staff, some individual staff may be affected more deeply than others so it is important for school leaders to recognise this. External support in the form of counsellors etc. may be beneficial to pupils and staff.

It is important to note that at the core of this will be the Headteacher/Principal who may well be dealing with the implications of such a sad event as a death of a pupil or colleague, yet still needs to lead staff and the whole school community. Academy Council and SET leadership team will be on hand to support senior colleagues throughout this process.

## **Section 2 - Supporting a bereaved pupil**

### **Returning to school after a bereavement**

It is important to have a key member of staff to help with the transition back into school. Someone who the child knows, has trust in and feels able to see if things are not going well, e.g. form tutor, SENCo, pastoral lead etc. Arranging a meeting on the child's return with families/carers is important so that school can gain the details as to what has exactly happened so that support plan can be produced for the child.

Purpose of the meeting:

- Acknowledge the issues whether that be a death, divorce or another separation.
- Allow the child to talk about their worries/concerns and maybe how they want the transition back to their friends/social group to be like. It may be worth a member of staff seeing friends before the child returns to support them in what they may wish to say/do to support their friend. They may need support too.
- Make arrangements for when the child may feel the need to see someone, e.g. 'time-out'.
- Arrange communication methods between home and school, and between the child and home for a short period of time if need be.
- Assure the child that staff are here to support as the child may have worries about schoolwork etc. It is important to inform relevant staff of any potential issues.

### **Longer term support**

It is vital that a full and accurate record is taken at the time of the bereavement, around the child's well-being as well as any relevant plan or support that was given. This is especially important as staffing may change and the member of staff supporting a child may not have been the one when first the event occurred. It may be several months, or even years before a child begins dealing with the bereavement so it is important to have accurate records.

It is important to recognise significant dates or anniversaries, e.g. birthdays, Mother's / Father's Day etc. when there may be some reaction in the child's state of mind and behaviour. Contact with home is especially important at this time.

Progress, behaviour and school work may be affected at various times, especially initially and on key dates. It is important at this time to keep other staff informed and to be extra vigilant looking out for the child. School should have a plan to deal with these eventualities.

It is important too that those children who may have already been vulnerable for a range of reasons are supported, as change and upset can have serious impact on their well-being. Liaison with the SENCo on these occasions by key pastoral staff is vital.

## **The Curriculum**

Various aspects of any school curriculum will have connections to life events which can cause death, separation and thus possible bereavement. Topics in Religious Education, History for example can cover topics which may be sensitive to a child going through bereavement. Therefore, in supporting a child returning to school, it is important to be aware of their curriculum. Informing parents/carers in advance will help to gather information about previous bereavements so that vulnerable pupils can be prepared for the lesson. Recently bereaved pupils may find it helpful if they are given the option to work elsewhere or step outside, if they think it would be too painful to attend.

However, in a broader aspect, it is important that death, grief, separation and bereavement are taught so that pupils can better understand emotions that at some stage or another, they are likely to experience.

## **Section 3 – The death of a pupil**

### **Roles and responsibilities**

It is important that a plan is put in place as early as possible and that there is a lead member of staff, whether that be the Headteacher/Principal, or another senior leader. How will the death and planning support impact on the running of the school, who will deputise the responsibilities of the lead staff if the event takes most/all of their time, especially in the first few days?

In the case of a traumatic or sudden death of a pupil, the school may be involved as part of a multi-agency review and therefore a representative for this aspect will need to be chosen. Other responsibilities will have to be decided in order to address each of the suggested procedures listed under the next heading.

### **Procedures**

Whenever news has reached the school, it is important to convene a senior leader's meeting as soon as possible. This may also include other key personnel such as pastoral leads, relevant form tutor etc. The news of the death of a child may have broken in the community outside school hours and convening a meeting well before the start of the next day's school will be useful to plan procedures.

To an extent, the nature of the death will dictate what the response and plan is, e.g. a child who may have been terminally ill for a period of time is of course difficult for the school community but perhaps the most challenging circumstances is the sudden death of a child unexpectedly, in a traumatic manner, e.g. suicide, car accident, or even a very public event such as a terrorist attack.

The following aspects are suggestions for the school to consider when dealing with the death of a child. It is by no means a comprehensive list but may guide schools towards a better support and response plan:

**The family of the child** – Contacting the family as early as possible to offer condolences and support is important. Depending on the family's needs, school should look to support them as best as possible. If the child comes from a vulnerable setting, liaison with external services may also be appropriate to ensure the family gain the support they need. A visit from a senior leader should be offered in the initial days to offer support in person and discuss any relevant arrangements, e.g. the funeral service, or any aspect with which the school may be able to help with. It is important to note that a family may not wish for any contact or visits and of course school must be respectful of this but where a family is identified as vulnerable, school leaders should liaise with social services.

It may be appropriate to invite the family in at some point, probably most suitable after school, to visit any area where the school has set out for others to pay their respect, e.g. somewhere pupils have signed a book of condolences.

**Friendship groups** – it is important to identify the closest friends of the child who has died. They may already be aware of the news, so it is important that they understand that they will be supported by the school and maybe some of the things they may expect in the coming days. If indeed the school needs to break the news to the children, it is important to ensure that their respective families are also involved as best they can, either in person if possible when the news is broken, or informed by telephone. Closest friends must be given a key member of staff they can go to and what to do if upset etc. It may be in the initial phase that they prefer to be at home with family. Depending on the nature of the death, they must be prepared for questions from peers who may be wishing to support their friends but may also be, out of curiosity, looking for answers to some details that may not be 'public'. This is especially difficult when a child has taken their own life.

**Informing the school community** – Even if news has broken overnight, there may be some of the community who are not aware. Academy Chair and councillors should of course be informed as soon as possible along with Trust leaders. Senior leaders should convene a short staff meeting asap before school and inform staff, bearing in mind many of the staff will also be upset. If there is a particular member of staff who may have been close to the child, e.g. form tutor, it would be worth speaking to his/her friends to ensure they have support at this initial time. Communicating to staff the need to support each other but to also be extra vigilant with pupils in recognising issues is important. Staff should be given a link member(s) of staff to communicate with regarding particular issues. Depending on the circumstances of the death and possible public interest, it may be appropriate to also hold a briefing at the end of the school day.

If the death of the child is sudden and unexpected, it may well be worth holding assemblies as soon as possible with relevant year groups, or indeed the whole school. Depending on the

nature of the school and or the circumstances of the death, it may be more appropriate to deliver the news in small groups. It is advisable before then to have spoken to the child's 'best friends' and possibly allow them to sit out of the assembly/meeting. If it is a death of child that may have been expected, it may be worth seeing their particular year group but each occasion will determine how many pupils and how quickly senior staff will see them. News will spread quite quickly but it may be that some children are not aware by the time the assembly occurs. School staff should be prepared for a variety of reactions when news is delivered.

To deliver the message it is worth noting the following points:

- Have a script prepared.
- The message should be one which is simple and factual, in part to prevent speculation and rumours. With the family's permission and dependent on the circumstances, a brief account should be given of where and when the death occurred, and how, if appropriate. If these facts are not all known, pupils should be informed that they will be told these details as soon as school can. Quash any rumours that may have been already communicated to school that are false.
- Staff delivering the message should not be afraid to show emotion. This can help children understand human reactions which are appropriate.
- If appropriate, remind pupils of their responsibilities and possible impact when posting on social media.
- Speak briefly and positively about the child who has died but don't eulogise.
- Mention any arrangements in place including for those who may need support and which staff they may see.
- Acknowledge that it's also ok not to feel sad, especially if the pupil was not known to other pupils.
- Whilst the message must offer support to pupils, clearly stating the expected behaviour and level of respect now needed from pupils is important. They should be encouraged to support each other at this time too and be more vigilant of their friends and peers.
- Before dismissing the pupils off to class, it is good to give them a few minutes to allow them to process the information that has been given to them and take a little 'time-out'.

It is useful to note that if the death may be of interest to the media, inform pupils that they should not be discussing the matter with any journalist or any other person who may approach them near school. This may be difficult to police as parents may respond to any media, but pupils should be made aware that they should not engage with the media on the way to and from school.

It may well be appropriate to inform the wider community, e.g. parents/carers, dependent on the circumstances and possible 'public profile' the death may bring. Template letters are included in Annex A but of course dependent on the circumstances of any death, this may need specific editing.

**Other vulnerable children** - Children react to bad news in lots of ways and not just those closest to the event. Some teenagers for example, who may have already have some vulnerability themselves, may be seen to react in a more extreme way. The death of a pupil they don't really know may trigger former experiences in their own lives, which staff must be aware of so that they can also be supported. It is not uncommon for other young people to 'exaggerate' their friendship with the child who has died and appear to be grief-stricken



because of the death. This can be confusing for the close friendship group of the child who has died. This child may be struggling with some aspect of self-identity and subconsciously may see the event as a way to 'gain attention'. Staff should be supportive of these children whilst at the same time get them to understand the grief and sadness others are experiencing at the time and how maybe best to support others.

**A place to grieve** – Again, dependent on the nature of the child's death, it may be appropriate to have a nominated quiet and safe place in school where friends may gather over the coming days. Whilst it is important to have a place for this, it is practically very important to 'manage' this facility as it may be seen by other vulnerable children as a place to go if they are upset and so it is important to have this place specifically for closest friends. Whilst the comfort of other children is important for those grieving most, staff should also note that it may not be 'healthy' for an individual friend to remain in this place for a long time or to have a constant gathering of close friends. It should be 'promoted' as a place for a short visit. Any child who is grieving and unable to function at some 'normal' level at school may need to go home or be supported elsewhere.

In addition, it may be appropriate to have somewhere for pupils and staff to gather maybe at break or part of lunch to sit together. A book of condolence can give pupils a purpose in such a place. This place should be relatively accessible by all as many pupils who are not directly affected may wish to pay their respects. Important to staff this place so that there is a flow of pupils and the environment remains appropriately respectful. Ensure it is communicated to all when this place will no longer be available.

**Media** – In most cases the media would not be a relevant factor, but in any high profile incident the media will take an interest. Many schools have found this quite a difficult process to manage whilst attempting to support the closer school community. Leaders should ensure they liaise with the SET central team for direction if this is a possible consequence of the child's death. There are some aspects that are useful to have prepared:

- Prepare a very basic script with minimum details to be given out to relevant media outlets when appropriate to do so.
- Have a script for school administrative staff who may receive a call from the media. The response should simply direct the caller to the public statement made by the school and if not yet made, simply state that a statement will be released shortly. No more.
- By all means take name and details of caller and pass on to Headteacher/Principal to respond in consultation with SET leadership if deemed relevant. The less is said the better, especially at initial stages.
- Ensure staff are on duty in numbers before and after school to discourage media from possibly congregating around the school perimeter. If need be involving the local police may help.

**School Timetable** – The death of child may result in the need for some reorganisation of the school day. It is best at all times to keep the school day as 'normal' as possible and to give all pupils a set routine for their day and to change as little as possible. However, some adjustments for some pupils may be appropriate.

**The funeral** – this to an extent will be dependent on the wishes of the family whether there is school involvement or not and may partly in some way be determined by a particular faith or

culture. If the school community is to be present, school leaders will have to decide how that occurs. It can range from school being closed for the day or part of the day, or the school being represented by a small number of staff and pupils.

If the school is to be closed, prior to the day, leaders should communicate to all pupils that only pupils 'connected' with the family should attend due to capacity etc. This is out of respect and sensitivity for the family. This may be a sensitive issue for some but it would be insensitive for groups of children to attend 'just to observe'.

School should liaise with the family as best they can in regards to any donations, flowers etc. It may be the family simply wish for a donation to be made to a chosen charity.

For a funeral service where some staff and pupils are attending, leaders will have to be sensitive around which staff may be able to attend. There should be a school leader present, if the Headteacher/Principal is not able to, and relevant school staff. Colleagues in school may be asked to cover for those attending the service.

## **Remembering**

Ongoing support is important for the whole community and part of this is how the child may be remembered. It is a sensitive matter for all concerned as there will be those who will have very definite opinions about how this should be done and what they deem to be appropriate which may be well-intentioned but are deemed inappropriate. Therefore, it is important to take opinion from others, not only from senior leaders and staff, but also friends and family of the child so that a respectful and appropriate memorial is decided on. It may be that a permanent memorial is decided, for example, a tree, bench on school grounds, piece of artwork etc. Or it may simply be a service in school is what is considered. A more permanent may be appropriate, but in future the removal, relocation or replacement will need to be managed sensitively. The school should then carefully decide what occurs on an anniversary. Whilst it may be important to mark the first anniversary of a death, school needs to be conscious about how long this may go on for and what is appropriate year after year.

## **Section 4 – The death of a member of staff**

The principles and procedures outlined above in the section on the death of a child are useful again to apply, some more than others in regards to communication to staff, communication to pupils and the wider community. Again the nature of the death may dictate the procedures which are needed.

The support of other staff, some of whom may have been very close to the member of staff who has died, needs to be a great priority and the support of other staff at this time for each other is vital.

As mentioned, principles are similar in terms of liaison with the family, offering support to the family, discussing funeral arrangements and deciding on how the school may remember their colleague.

On a more practical nature, leaders at a time of upset and sadness need to ensure the work of their colleague is covered and that pupils continue to be supported to the high standards set with in the school.

## **Annex A: Template letters to parents/carers after a death in the school community**

### **a) Letter to family following the death of their child.**

Dear

We are so very sorry to hear the sad news of <name's> death. Our Trust leaders and staff, academy councillors, staff and pupils of the school, wish to offer our condolences to you and your family at this sad time.

There are no words to express our deep sadness and we can only begin to imagine the anguish you must be going through. As a school community, we are doing our best to offer comfort and support to <his/her> friends, classmates and staff. <Name> was a <valued / loved / popular / well-regarded / friendly> member of our school family and <he/she> will be sorely missed.

We would greatly appreciate being informed of any funeral arrangements for <name> and if you need any assistance as you plan, please don't hesitate to ask us.

If there is anything we can do for you at this time, then please let us know.

We will continue to keep in touch and will support you in any way we can.

With sympathy

Headteacher

### **b) Letter to parents/carers following the death of a pupil.**

Dear Parents/Carer,

We have had the sad task of informing our school community of the death of <name>, a pupil in <Year X>.

<Name> died suddenly / in hospital / after an illness / in a car accident / last week / during half term etc.>

<He/she> was a <valued / loved / popular / well-regarded / friendly> member of our school community and will be sorely missed by all who knew <him/her>.

Dealing with the death of a peer and friend can be difficult for young people and we will be of course supporting all of our people at school especially those closest to <name>. Some pupils may feel shock, others sadness, while others may be confused, angry or feel 'numb'. These reactions are all normal and our staff are here to support all.

We have tried to answer all questions at school but it may be your child has more when they are at home. If you need support in helping your child please do not hesitate to get in touch and/or by all means use one of the many online resources available, e.g. [Child Bereavement](#), [Childhood Bereavement Network](#).

Our thoughts are with <name's> family and friends at this time. We will be in touch with details of how our school will celebrate/remember <name's> life.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

**c) Letter to parents/carers following the death of a member of staff.**

Dear Parent/Carer,

I am writing with some sad news that you may have already heard from your son/daughter. A member of our school staff, <name>, died <suddenly at home / in hospital / after illness / car accident etc.>. This has been sad news for our staff at losing a dear friend and work colleague. We have been in contact with <his/her> family to pass on our condolences on behalf of our community.

<Name> has worked at <school name> since <year> in the role of <English teacher / school office etc.>. <Name> was a <valued member of staff / thoughtful / dedicated / supportive etc.> member of staff who will be sorely missed by all at school.

When someone dies, young people can react in a number of ways. Some pupils may feel shock, others sadness, while others may be confused, angry or feel 'numb'. These reactions are all normal and our staff are here to support all.

We have tried to answer all questions at school but it may be your child has more when they are at home. If you need support in helping your child please do not hesitate to get in touch and/or by all means use one of the many online resources available, e.g. [Child Bereavement](#), [Childhood Bereavement Network](#).

Our thoughts are with <name's> family and friends at this time. We will be in touch with details of how our school will celebrate/remember <name's> life.

Yours sincerely,

Headteacher

## Annex B: Addendum to Bereavement Policy: Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought extraordinary times to our lives and its impact will be felt for a long time. Support and [guidance](#) for all aspects of our lives from financial to educational and beyond is well documented and available.

A very sad consequence of this virus which has become evident to us all is that many will lose loved ones and children may experience death in their family and parents and schools may experience the death of a child.

However, the unique nature of this situation means that it may well be the case that a loved one dies in a hospital away from family and possibly even funerals occur that cannot be attended by all or most of the family affected. Likewise, in the event of the death of a pupil the school community at the time may be unable to grieve properly.

All children will have questions about the effects of the virus but for children who have had someone important die or have a member of their family who is ill, this anxiety is likely to be heightened. Children may also pick up on the anxiety of adults around them, may see coverage on news and social media, and of course be aware of changed procedures at school. In addition, children will be worried for elderly relatives such as grandparents who are vulnerable and cannot be visited by the child.

A child who has lost an elderly relative, a parent or even a sibling during the pandemic will need lots of support.

Much of the guidance in this policy can be 'adapted' for these eventualities but conversations and procedures may need to be done remotely. To that end, it was deemed appropriate to have an addendum to this policy.

In making contact with the family, the member of school staff can ensure they;

- acknowledge what has happened
- express support
- discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community (if it is the death of a pupil or member of staff)
- check if family want their contact information shared
- if it's a death in the family, ask about the pupil specifically and how they are doing, maybe gaining the opportunity to speak with them
- Arrange future contact and which staff will make the contact

In the event of a death in the family, with the agreement of parents/carers, it may be beneficial to set up a regular call time between school and home so that the child can speak to a member of school staff to support the work of their family. This helps keep a routine for the child. It may even include discussing some schoolwork or task that maintains some sense of normality for them.

In addition, in the event of the death of a pupil or member of staff, the following actions are worth taking:

- Contact Academy Council and SET leadership colleagues.
- Decide what other pupils/staff need to be contacted who may be close friends of the child/member of staff and offer support as best possible including regular contact.
- Access to a physical book of condolences may not always be possible, e.g. during the pandemic lockdown, so it is worth considering how an electronic book of condolences may be set up and accessible to all, obviously following family wishes, and centrally controlled by school.
- Letter of condolence to be sent out to the family again emphasising the offer of support made during the telephone conversation.
- Prepare a statement and method of sharing the news with the rest of the school community.
- Keep in touch with staff and pupils, especially those who may be affected most by the death.

Support from school staff can be vital at this time for some children and staff, even if not in school. Hearing a familiar voice from school could be important to them.

Some helpful advice which may be appropriate to share with staff and parents when talking to a child during this time:

**Acknowledge their worries** - It's good to talk to them honestly but calmly about what is happening, and to not ignore or shield them from what is going on in the world. Children and young people who have been bereaved or are facing the death of someone important will appreciate people acknowledging their particular concerns.

**Reassure** - It is natural that children and young people who have experienced the death of someone important may worry that something will happen to someone else in their family. It may be helpful to remind your child that some people only experience mild symptoms and reassure them that more people are recovering from the virus than dying from it.

**Talk to them about coronavirus** - Don't be afraid to have conversations with your child about coronavirus – not talking about something can sometimes make children worry more. Other children will be talking about it at school and they may have heard it on the news or social media.

**Share memories** – It's important to continue to talk about someone who may have died, maybe share memories.

**Get support** – there are many support networks out there who can help. [Child Bereavement UK](#), [Winston's Wish](#), [Bereavement Advice](#) and [Child Bereavement Network](#),

**Alternative goodbyes** – if a child cannot attend a funeral, there are other ways in isolation that a family could do this. Lighting a candle, releasing a balloon from the garden, or simply saying some prayers or having a reflective moment together can help. Creating a special place where they are can help, maybe the corner of the garden for example.



**We believe, you achieve**

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