



Bereavement Policy

Policy Owner: Head Teacher

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Next Review Date: June 2022

Sign off signatory: Chair of LAB

Rationale

1 in 29 pupils aged five to sixteen-years olds has been bereaved of a parent or sibling– that is one in every class. Many more are bereaved of a grandparent, relative, friend or other significant person. Within a school community there will almost always be some pupils who are struggling with bereavement – or sometimes the entire school community is impacted by the death of a member of staff or a pupil. (Child bereavement UK)

Aims and Ethos

At Austrey Church of England Primary School, considering our school values, we aim to provide an empathic understanding in the familiar and secure surroundings of our school. Our aim is to have suitably trained staff in school who understand the complexities surrounding bereavement, and can help support families at times of bereavement to ensure that the school does what it can to best meet the needs of the bereaved. This may require referrals to outside agencies to provide the level of support that has been identified for individual children.

It is important that children are helped to understand bereavement in a clear way, and given opportunities to experience the full range of emotions that may accompany bereavement within a safe and supportive environment.

Objectives

At Austrey Church of England Primary School, to best support staff and pupils during times of bereavement it will be necessary to ascertain sensitive and potentially distressing information regarding the nature of an illness or cause of death of the member of our community. We will always ensure that any meetings with families are conducted in a comfortable, private space, in an unhurried manner. If this information must be shared we will always be clear with parents beforehand about how we will respect confidentiality and share information sensitively, only where it is in the interests of the bereaved and the school community.

Our school is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils and through our vision and values aim to prepare pupils for coping with separation or loss of a loved one.

Procedures

At times of bereavement it is important that rumour and speculation are avoided. We will take time to talk to the affected family or staff member about the circumstances surrounding the bereavement. Knowing the background will help us provide the best support for those affected by bereavement. We will discuss with the family the extent to which the circumstances should be shared with other staff members and pupils, in order to provide the best support for the grieving child.

To help pupils understand bereavement we will typically aim to inform groups of children of the death of a pupil or staff member in small groups, supported by staff with whom they are familiar. We will allow children to ask questions, and will endeavour to answer sensitively, factually and using age appropriate language to help all children understand what has happened. Subject to the wishes of the family, in the event where a pupil or staff member has died, the school may be closed if necessary in order to allow staff and pupils to attend the funeral.

Where a member of the school community has died, the school will endeavour to provide additional space and time for those staff or pupils most likely to be particularly affected.

Returning to school

Most grieving pupils do not need a 'bereavement expert', they need the support of familiar and trusted adults. Austrey Church of England Primary School, with its familiar environment and routines, can be a place of comfort for a bereaved young person. It can be helpful to meet with the pupil and their family/carers to discuss their return to school. The meeting should be offered with a familiar adult, such as the class teacher, SENCO, mental health first aider or Deputy or Head teacher. The wishes of the family should be taken into consideration when choosing staff to communicate with the family.

The purpose of the meeting with parents/carer should be to:

- Organise a safe space for the bereaved pupil to go if they feel overwhelmed by their grief and need a 'time-out'. How will they inform staff of this? For example, a 'time-out' card, a non-verbal signal or message.
- Consider whether to provide 'time-out' activities – journals, art and craft, books, screen time, memory boxes etc.
- Set guidelines for communication – with the pupil, between members of staff and between home and school.
- Consider providing support for peers when they have a bereaved friend.

When the pupil returns to school, staff will be expected to be particularly vigilant regarding the emotional wellbeing of pupils close to the deceased.

Although school can provide stability and normality for staff and pupils, some flexibility may be necessary. Bereaved young people may need time to grieve and manage overwhelming feelings, being able to leave a classroom and take time out in a safe space can be very welcome.

Where there is media interest no member of staff should engage with the media. All comment should be made through the head teacher or chair of governors if the Headteacher is unavailable.

Transition

At Austrey Church of England Primary School, we recognise that grief doesn't come with a specific time frame and the pupil may require ongoing support. Significant dates or anniversaries, Mother's/Father's Day, etc. may be particularly difficult for the child/family, it will be helpful to provide ongoing support to the pupil if we are aware of significant dates. Regular contact with the family/carers and reviews with the pupil will help to build up an overall picture of how the pupil is coping.

Grief may have an impact on the pupil's progress. Some pupils work really hard and may put themselves under extra pressure to succeed, while others may find it difficult to focus in class and on their work. We recognise that bereaved children can find change difficult, so preparing them in advance (where possible) may help them to voice their worries and ease the process.

It is vitally important to ensure that if a child has experienced bereavement that this information is passed on to the relevant persons when they move on to a new class or school.

List of Online Resources and Information

www.winstonswish.org.uk A useful website offering practical ideas for helping those bereaved in the family and school community.

www.childbereavement.org.uk A bereavement support service for children who have suffered a loss

<http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk> An organisation offering local bereavement support to both adults and children

www.stgileshospice.com support for children, young people and their family

Books on Bereavement

GRANPA

John Burningham (Puffin, 1998, ISBN 0099-43408-3)

Designed to stimulate discussion rather than to tell a story, the book has a series of scenes of a little girl and her grandad, with comments from each or both of them. At the end, she is shown staring at his empty chair, without comments. The book allows the adult to direct discussion about not only the good things that the child remembers, but also the not so happy memories.

WHEN DINOSAURS DIE

L & M Brown (Little, Brown, 1996, hb, ISBN 0-316-10197-7)

Charming busy anthropomorphic pictures of dinosaurs illustrate topics and questions and a range of answers about death: Saying Goodbye; Customs and beliefs about death; Why do people die? What does "dead" mean?. It is also quite acute psychologically, acknowledging that disbelief, anger, fear, and sadness are common feelings when someone dies. Expensive, but attractive and appealing to children.

REMEMBERING GRANDAD

Sheila and Kate Isherwood (Oxford, ISBN 0-19-272368-5)

A girl's grandfather has died and looking back over the happy times they enjoyed together helps her to cope with the loss. Very specific episodes and illustrations give it a life-like feel. Sensible and sound if a little stereotyped in its pictures of family life, it could help children to think about how to remember someone.

FRED

Posy Simmons (Jonathan Cape, 1987, ISBN 0-2240-2448-5)

When Fred the cat dies, his owners Nick and Sophie attend his funeral and learn about his secret life as a famous singer. The story raises the idea of celebrating a life in a good-humoured and touching way, with entertaining pictures and not much text.

GRANDAD, I'LL ALWAYS REMEMBER YOU

De Bode and Broere (Evans / Helping Hands, 1997, ISBN 0237-51755-8)

A picture book about loss and memories, and potentially a good stimulus to talk about a bereavement.

LIFETIMES

Beginnings and endings with lifetimes in between – a beautiful way to explain life and death to children

Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (Belitha Press, 1997, ISBN 1-85561-760-9).

places human life and death firmly in the natural world, and the tone is quietly reflective: "All around us everywhere, beginnings and endings are going on all the time. It may be sad, but it is the way of all things. For plants; for people; and for birds".

BADGER'S PARTING GIFTS

Susan Varley (Collins Picture Lions, pb, 1992)

An old favourite, a charming illustrated book in which a very old and much loved badger dies. The forest animals gather and reminisce about the important part Badger played in their lives, and as time passes memories of Badger make them smile. These memories were different for each of them, including very recognisable things like a favourite recipe or showing someone how to knot a tie - Badger's "parting gifts"

WE LOVE THEM

Martin Waddell (Walker Books, 1990, ISBN 0-7445-7256-8)

Death is seen very much as part of life in this nicely illustrated story of life in the country, which conveys the idea that life goes on and that old creature's give way to young ones. But it is a bit too matter of fact about loss - barely is the old dog dead than the children have found a new one, is there an implicit message that dead pets (and people?) are easily replaced.

GRANDMA'S BILL

Martin Waddell (Macdonald Young Books, pb, ISBN 0- 7500-0307-3)

Bill's grandma is a widow, and he learns about her "other Bill" by looking through her photo album with her. A bit too stereotypically suburban and middle class for general appeal perhaps. Some like its ordinariness, gentleness and factual accuracy, and couldn't fault what it had to say about death and living on in memories and in the family.

I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU

H Wilhelm (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985)

A touching story of the love between a little boy and his dog, who have grown up together. When the dog dies, the boy says that, although he is very sad, it helps that he used to tell the dog "I'll always love you" every night. An opportunity to discuss the importance of telling how you feel. Aimed at 4 to 7 year olds and delightfully illustrated.

A BIRTHDAY PRESENT FOR DANIEL

Juliet Rothman (Prometheus Books, ISBN 1-57392-054-1)

This story of a little girl whose brother has died is intended for children aged 8-12. "A difficult subject handled very well and movingly".

The following guidelines are taken from CRUSE bereavement care website. They are general principles, and need to be thought about whatever the needs of the child are. Adapt and aid communication as appropriate.

Loss from a child's perspective

For many children and young people the death of a parent, caregiver, sibling or grandparent is an experience they are faced with early in life. It is sometimes incorrectly assumed that a child or young person who is bereaved by the death of someone close at a young age will not be greatly affected as they are too young to understand the full implications of death.

This is untrue and unhelpful. Even babies are able to experience loss. A baby cannot cognitively process the implications of the bereavement but that does not mean that they do not feel the loss.

Accepting the child's experience

Children and young people need to be given the opportunity to grieve as any adult would. Trying to ignore or avert the child's grief is not protective, in fact it can prove to be extremely damaging as the child enters adulthood. Children and young people regardless of their age need to be encouraged to talk about how they are feeling and supported to understand their emotions.

It is also important to remember that children and young people grieve in different ways. Grief is unique and therefore it is not wise to assume that all children and young people will experience the same emotions, enact the same behaviour or respond similarly to other grieving children and young people. A child or young person's grief differs from that of an adult's grief because it alters as they develop.

Time to grieve

Children and young people often revisit the death and review their emotions and feelings about their bereavement as they move through their stages of development. Children do not have the emotional capacity to focus on their grief for long periods of time and therefore it is not uncommon for grieving children and young people to become distracted by play. This is a protective mechanism which allows the child or young person to be temporarily diverted from the bereavement.

Bereaved children need time to grieve and in order for them to address the bereavement they need to be given the facts regarding the death in language appropriate to their age or level of comprehension. Avoid using metaphors for death such as, "Daddy has gone to sleep", this will make the child or young person believe that Daddy will come back to them and may constantly ask when he is going to wake up. Similarly the child or young person might encounter problems with bedtime and not wanting to sleep for fear of not waking up.

Talking to children

It is understandable that many caregivers are reluctant to talk to the child or young person about the death as they do not want to cause distress or fear. Children and young people who are bereaved need to know that their loved one has died, how they died and where they are now. Failure to be honest with the grieving child means that their grief is not being acknowledged and this can cause problems later on.

If the bereaved child or young person wants to ask questions about death and what dying means, answer them truthfully and if you do not know the answer to a specific question don't be tempted to make the answer up. Assure the child that although you do not know the answer to their question you will find out for them.

Key points to remember

- Babies can experience feelings of loss
- Be honest with the bereaved child or young person
- Avoid using metaphors for death
- Every child and young person's grief is unique
- Encourage the child or young person to talk about the death and how they feel
- Children and young people may 'revisit' the death and review their feelings about the bereavement as they develop
- Use language that is appropriate to the child or young person's age and level of comprehension.

<http://www.cruse.org.uk/Children/loss-from-childs-perspective>

Childrens' understanding of death

The following information is based on developmental chronology, and is taken from

CRUSE bereavement care website. It is helpful to consider these developmental levels when thinking about how children with special needs may experience grief.

The nature of a child's understanding of death and bereavement will be different at different stages of development. Although a child's grief is individual, their understanding of the loss of a loved one progresses as they mature. In this section you will find the most common understandings of death by children at certain stages of their development.

Do bear in mind that a child's understanding of death during their development will differ in circumstances where the child may be experiencing educational difficulties.

Birth to six months

Babies do not cognitively understand the notion of death; however that does not mean to say that they do not respond to the loss of someone close, or that they don't experience grief. A baby up to six months old experiences feelings of separation and abandonment as part of their bereavement. The

bereaved baby is aware that the person is missing, or not there and this can cause the baby to become anxious and fretful. This can be heightened if it is the baby's primary caregiver who has died and the baby is able to identify that the one who is now feeding them, changing them and cuddling them is not the deceased person. Similarly if it is the baby's mother who is grieving a loss, the baby can pick up on these feelings and experience grief too.

Six months to two years

At this developmental stage the baby is able to picture their mother or primary caregiver internally if she/he is not present. If it is the primary caregiver who has died the baby will protest at their absence by loud crying and angry tears. It is common for babies to become withdrawn and lose interest in their toys and feeding and they will likely lose interest interacting with others. At the more mature end of this developmental stage bereaved toddlers can be observed actively seeking the deceased person. For instance if granddad spent much of his time prior to death in his shed the toddler might persistently return to investigate the shed in the hope that they will find him there.

Two years to five years

During their development between the age of two to five, children do not understand that death is irreversible. For instance a four year old child may be concerned that although nanny was dead she should have come home by now. This example illustrates how children at this stage do not understand the finality of death and nor do they understand what the term "dead" actually means. It is common for a young child to be told that their aunt has died and still expect to see them alive and well in the immediate future. Children do not understand that life functions have been terminated and will ask questions such as:

"Won't Uncle Bob be lonely in the ground by himself?"

"Do you think we should put some sandwiches in Grandpa's coffin in case he gets hungry?"

"What if Nan can't breathe under all that earth?"

"Will Daddy be hurt if they burn him?"

As the cognitive understanding of children in this age range is limited they can sometimes demonstrate less of a reaction to the news of the death than might be observed by an older child and might promptly go out to play on hearing the news of the death.

Children aged between two and five years old have difficulty with the abstract concepts surrounding death. For instance they might be confused as to how one person can be in a grave and also be in heaven at the same time. They will become further confused if they are told that the deceased person is simply sleeping and this in turn could make them fearful of falling asleep or seeing anyone else asleep. They might insist on waiting for the person who has died to wake up or similarly if they have been told that the person who has died has gone on a long journey they may await their return.

At this age bereaved children can become involved in omnipotence or magical thinking. This refers to the concept that bereaved children believe that their actions, inaction, words, behaviours or thoughts are directly responsible for their loved one's death. This form of thinking is not exclusive to this particular age group and can be experienced by many bereaved children and young people of older ages. It is essential that you explain to the bereaved child that the death was not in any way their fault or responsibility. The need to reassure the grieving child that nothing they said / didn't say, did or didn't do caused the death is paramount.

Five years to ten years

Children at this developmental stage have acquired a wider understanding of death and what it entails. They begin to realise that death is the end of a person's life, that the person who has died won't return and that life functions have been terminated.

By the age of seven the average child accepts that death is an inevitability and that all people including themselves will eventually die.

This understanding can also increase a child's anxieties regarding the imminent deaths of other people who they are close to. Children of this age are broadening their social networks by attending school and are therefore open to receive both information and misinformation from their peers and social circles.

With this in mind it is important that the cause of death, the funeral and burial process and what happens to the deceased person's body are explained in a factual and age appropriate manner to the bereaved child. Children will ask many questions and may want to know intricate details pertaining to the death and decomposition of the body. Again, it is vital that children have such details explained to them clearly so that they understand.

At this developmental stage children can empathise with and show compassion for peers that have been bereaved. Children aged between five and ten often copy the coping mechanisms that they observe in bereaved adults and they may try to disguise their emotions in an attempt to protect the bereaved adult. The bereaved child can sometimes feel that they need permission to show their emotions and talk about their feelings. The important thing is to let them do this. Avoid remarks such as, "Come on be a big brave girl for mummy" or "Big boys don't cry", such comments however well-meant can make children feel they need to hide their feelings or that what they are feeling is wrong. This can cause complications as the bereaved child develops.