

Bereavement Policy



Wynndale Values:

Respect, Responsibility, Tolerance, Determination, Kindness and Pride:

Our values underpin everything we do here at Wynndale Primary School. They help us form our attitudes, guide our choices and influence our behaviours. The whole staff team, governors, families and children are involved in promoting our values and recognising when others are living the values.

At Wynndale, we have six core values that are at the heart of all we do. These values are explored continually with our learning community – we explore what the value means and how we can use this value to develop our school as a positive, safe and inspirational place to be.

Rationale

We understand that bereavement is faced by members of our school community at different times and that when the loss is of a member of our school community – such as a child or staff member, it can be particularly difficult. Pupils need to be supported when they experience family bereavements and other significant losses in the course of their lives while they are at school.

This policy will provide guidelines to be followed after a bereavement. The aim is to be supportive to both pupils and adults, and for staff to have greater confidence and be better equipped to cope when bereavement happens. Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different and this policy has been constructed to guide us on how to deal professionally, sensitively and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.

This school is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils. We are dedicated to the continual development of a 'healthy school'. We wish to work towards this in all aspects of school life, and to provide an ethos, environment and curriculum that support and prepare pupils for coping with separation or loss of a loved one, either through death or divorce.

Following a Bereavement:

- children and staff will be given space and time to grieve
- children and staff be given support from whichever source is deemed the most appropriate – if possible, of their own choice.
- children and staff will encounter a caring environment in which they feel safe to demonstrate grief without fear of judgement.
- we recognise that grief may not always be apparent to the onlooker, but its invisibility makes it no less real.
- we understand that differing religions/cultures view death and bereavement from different perspectives and all viewpoints should be taken into consideration and given equal value in the school environment.
- we know that the death of a child has huge repercussions beyond the immediate teaching/care team of that child and every effort should be taken to inform and deal sensitively with the far-reaching contacts.

The Management of Bereavement in School

Each bereavement is unique and comes with its own specific challenges; however, it is helpful to have a framework on which to build. One of our main concerns must be the immediate family of the deceased and as a school we state our commitment to any such family as may need practical, emotional and ongoing support.

Sharing information

Contact with the family should be established by the headteacher, and their wishes respected in communication with others. The process for telling other pupils will be decided by the head teacher, following consultation with the teaching staff and the family of the deceased. This will take into account the different ages and levels of understanding of the pupils in school.

The funeral

In consultation with the bereaved family, arrangements for funeral attendance may be clarified, with the consideration of full or partial school closure in some circumstances.

Responding to the media

Some deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, attract media attention. All members of staff are advised not to respond to journalists and to refer all enquiries to the Headteacher, who will make a considered response after seeking assistance from the Local Authority Press Office.

On-Going Support For Pupils:

- The approach and resources used by the school will be shared with the family prior to working with the child
- A suitable key worker will be identified to support the child
- All relevant staff will be made aware of the approach the keyworker will take
- The school will continue to update their bereavement resources, making sure they have a selection of appropriate materials for different age groups and levels of understanding. These will be gathered from a range of recognised childhood bereavement initiatives (such as those listed in Appendix A)
- Any support packages and interventions will last for as long as the child needs it and won't be time limited.
- The school will share parental advice and guidance from the websites listed in Appendix A with parents and carers if appropriate.
- The school will 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.

The Role of the Governing Body:

- To approve this policy and ensure its implementation
- To review this policy every three years

The role of the headteacher:

- To monitor progress and liaise with external agencies
- To respond to media enquiries
- To be the first point of contact for the family concerned

- To keep the governing body fully informed
- To represent school at any multi agency meetings arising because of a bereavement, where requested.
- To refer any staff affected by bereavement to Occupational Health

The role of the LEA:

- To advise and support staff.
- Consult on referral pathways and identification of complex grief

Appendix A - 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

www.bbc.co.uk/.../bereavement/bereavement_helpchildren.shtml

Information on the way bereavement affects children

<http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk>

An organisation offering local bereavement support to both adults and children

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/index.htm>

Federation of organisations

Appendix B

Template of a letter informing parents of the death of a pupil

Before sending a letter home to parents about the death of a pupil, permission must be gained from the child's parents.

The contents of the letter and the distribution list must be agreed by the parents and school.

<Address>

<Date>

Dear Parents

Your child's class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the death of <Name>, a pupil in <Year>.

(<Name> died from an illness called cancer. As you may be aware, many children who have cancer get better but sadly <Name> had been ill for a long time and died peacefully at home yesterday.)

He/She was a very popular member of the class and will be missed by everyone who knew him/her.

When someone dies it is normal for their friends and family to experience lots of different feelings like sadness, anger and confusion.

The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try to answer their questions at school but if there is anything more that you or your child needs to know, please do not hesitate to ring the school office and we would be more than happy to help you.

(We will be arranging a memorial service in the school in the next few months as a means of celebrating <Name>'s life.)

Yours sincerely

<Name> Head Teacher

Template of a letter informing parents of the death of a member of staff

<Address>

<Date>

Dear Parents

Your child's class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the tragic death of <Name> who has been a teacher at this school for a number of years.

Our thoughts are with <Name>'s family at this time and in an effort to try to respond to his/her death in a positive way, all the children have been informed.

When someone dies it is normal for family and friends to experience many different feelings like sadness, anger and confusion, and children are likely to ask questions about the death that need to be answered honestly and factually in terms that they will understand.

The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school but if there is anything else you or your child needs to know, please do not hesitate to ring the school office and we will be more than happy to help you.

Yours sincerely

<Name> Head Teacher

Appendix C Supporting pupils

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 and young people 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 and young people 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 or young person 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 or young person 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>

Children's 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.

<http://www.cruse.org.uk/Children/children-understanding-death#birth>