

Childhood Bereavement Advice for Teachers

The effects on children in school
and how to deal with them



Introduction

Like adults, children and young people experience grief and loss when they are bereaved. This can affect their learning and behaviour in school. There are several ways in which schools can support children and young people through bereavement.

Some general strategies for supporting children and young people:

- Make opportunities to talk without putting pressure on the child or young person.
- Ask the child or young person what help and support they would like.
- Let them know it is alright to feel guilty, afraid or angry.
- Use books and stories to calm and distract younger children.
- Give time and attention: listen.
- Discourage social isolation, use peer-based strategies where you can.
- Provide opportunities for privacy, children may wish to express emotions alone.

Kent Educational Psychology Service can provide more information about grief reactions, supporting children and young people, wider issues for schools, references and contact numbers for support.

<https://www.kelsi.org.uk/special-education-needs/educational-psychology/crisis-support-service>

Supporting bereaved children and young people

Be aware of pupils who may not want to let school know about the difficulties they face. Young children will sometimes carry on as though nothing has happened. Such a reaction can concern, perplex and even anger adults.

Children reacting in this way will still grieve, although the process may take longer. Recognition of the impact of the event may occur over time, and in small steps.

Times of transition

Recent research has found that the effects of a bereavement are most pronounced when children are around five years old and then again at around 12 years old. These risk times coincide with transitions in the school system.



Schools should consider:

- Asking families about recent bereavements when children join the school.
- Including information about significant deaths or difficult reactions in school transition notes from primary to secondary school.

Respecting privacy

Always respect cultural and personal views and beliefs, including a wish to be left alone to grieve. School member of staff need to know when a bereavement might be affecting a child's wellbeing and development, and what to do when it does.

Normal grief reactions

Normal bereavement can involve any of the following:

- High levels of distress
- Guilt
- Preoccupation with issues surrounding the loss
- Anxiety
- Withdrawal
- Alarm
- Panic
- Insomnia
- Apathy
- Loss of concentration
- Ongoing stress and family problems

These reactions are commonly seen up to two years after a bereavement and in some cases will be seen even later. A significant loss will affect children's anxiety levels and will have an impact on their attainment in school. Children who have lost a parent or a sibling are at a disadvantage in school. They have been found to score below their peers in GCSE examinations.

Consider seeking further professional help if pupils show:

- Persistent anxieties about their own death
- Difficulty forming new relationships
- Strong reactions against talking about the deceased
- Destructive outbursts
- Stealing
- School Phobia

If these reactions continue for more than three months, then the child may need professional support to deal with possible post-traumatic stress caused by the grief.

Schools make a difference

Bereavement can mean sudden and dramatic changes to the support structures around a child. People who provide care may no longer be there or may be suffering with their own grief and shock. Schools provide routine and consistency in care and social relationships. They can foster new networks of support for children and young people and provide a place of normality and security when other aspects of life are disrupted. They can play an important role in helping children and young people to process and come to terms with their grief.

Contacts and information

Web:

www.kelsi.org.uk/special-education-needs/educational-psychology/crisis-support-service

Grief and Loss Resources

www.theeducationpeople.org/products/partner-providers/grief-loss-and-crisis-support

Email:

Educational.psychology@kent.gov.uk

Phone:

03000 410 100

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