

General guidance for school staff when supporting pupils (any age) following loss/ bereavement

In the majority of cases, it will not be necessary to involve bereavement experts or counsellors; rather it is about identifying and bolstering pre-existing networks of support within your setting, around the most vulnerable, while disseminating information in a sensitive and factual manner. Adults supporting children and young people should support through the following means:

Sympathetic listening – Children and young people need familiar and trusted adults who support them to talk about what has happened and express how they are feeling. They need to feel safe and cared for. They need affection, calm reassurance and clear information in words they can understand.

Acknowledging their loss directly - Let a child/young person know that you are aware of what has happened. It also gives a child/young person permission to talk about their grief, should they wish to. This could be as simple as saying *“I’m sorry for / I heard about what happened. I’m here if you would like to talk to someone”*.

Be honest about what has happened - Give information and answer questions accurately in words that children/young people will understand (in line with their age and developmental stage). This includes saying, *“I don’t know”*, if you don’t. Avoid phrases for death such as *“gone to sleep”*, *“lost”* or *“gone on a long journey”* as these may confuse or even make a child/young person fearful of everyday events such as sleeping or travelling; instead say that the person has *“died”*. What children/young people are not told, they will make up using their imagination which may be worse.

Be prepared for children to ask the same questions multiple times. This is a way for them to process and begin to make sense of what has happened. Ensure your answers remain consistent.

Normalise feelings, don’t feel that you have to hide your own – It can be very helpful for children/young people to see it is normal to be upset by death and that crying or showing emotion is nothing to be embarrassed about. They also need to be allowed to comfort others so that they can receive comfort more easily in return. Support conversations about death, loss and grief, through the use of Emotion Coaching scripts (see Example Emotion Coaching scripts document for further information).

Maintain familiar routines and structures - Maintaining familiar surroundings and routines e.g. bedtimes, mealtimes, school routines, resuming hobbies, clubs, outside activities etc., will provide some sense of normality and help to give a sense of security. Some children/young people may immediately wish to talk about what has happened, others may wish to engage in something practical, e.g. making cards, writing a letter to the family. Other pupils may take more time to absorb what has happened and prefer to maintain their normal routine.

Be mindful this could be a child/young person's first experience of death – Children/young may therefore not know how to react and will look to adults around them as a guide as to how they should behave, depending upon their family's culture and beliefs.

Children/young people are likely to mourn differently to adults and will not be sad all of the time – We should avoid judgement/assuming that children/young people are unaffected if, and when they become absorbed in their play/activities and seem to have forgotten what has happened.

Children/young people may feel guilty – Examples might include younger children feeling that they caused the death by being naughty. They may feel guilty because they were unkind to the person who died. A sibling of a child who has died may feel guilty that he/she survived. There may also be guilt that they did not prevent what happened. In this circumstance, be understanding and offer reassurance.

Support a child/young person to understand other's grief - In the case of parents who have lost a child, the remaining children need help in understanding that their parents' overwhelming grief is the reason for their emotional unavailability and not due to rejection of the children themselves.

Be aware that a child/young person's behaviour may regress - It is very common for children to temporarily revert to an earlier stage of development such as thumb sucking or wetting the bed. Temporary sleep disturbance is also very common including difficulty getting off to sleep and/or nightmares once asleep.

Support children/young people to express their grief – Children/young people may not be able to do this verbally but may wish to make memorial arrangements, be able to draw pictures, make cards for the family of the person who has died. These cards and pictures could then be put into a special book of condolence/displayed centrally/used in a memorial service and later given to the family.

Remember that a large part of the child/young person's memory is at school - If a child/young person has died, discuss with the classmates how to mark their place in class. Be aware of the child/young person's work and possessions (e.g. individual tray, peg, locker etc.) and do not be in a hurry to remove them, as these are likely to be a comfort to their friends.

Adjust work expectations and demands - The quality and quantity of work produced by children/young people may temporarily reduce. Make allowances and inform external agencies for any external assessments such as SATs/GCSEs/A-Levels, where appropriate.

Be aware of others who may be vulnerable – This event may trigger emotional reactions in others (pupils or staff) past or present circumstances. Be curious in cases where others, who may not have known the person who died very well, perhaps have a significant reaction. It is likely that they will need support for additional reasons.