



East Ayrshire Psychological Service
Interim Psychological Advice for Practitioners:
Supporting Children and Young People Through
Bereavement and Loss during Covid-19

Background

We are living in uncertain times with an increase in mortality due to Covid-19 and the consequences of our approach as a society to prevent its spread. This guidance seeks to help practitioners feel more comfortable and confident in supporting children and families experiencing loss. If we consider children's loss in its widest sense (i.e. including family separation, imprisonment, loss of a home, as well as bereavement of a family member or friend) practitioners will already have experience of supporting grieving children. We know that the majority of grieving children have their needs met by trusted, familiar adults, including teachers, without the need for accessing specialist support. However, the current context of Covid-19, means that we need to be prepared for an increase in the number of grieving children in our establishments and also be aware that their loss experience is taking place in a time of unprecedented uncertainty and anxiety. Social isolation means that usual access to family, school and community supports and opportunities to participate in grieving rituals such as funerals are limited.

Protective Factors already in place

We can be assured that the universal health and wellbeing supports that school and ECC staff have worked hard to embed in their establishments over the years, such as the Relationships Framework, Nurture Principles, Restorative Approaches and comprehensive programmes of personal and social education are crucial in developing children's sense of connectedness and their resilience. Both of which are key to managing the current stresses of the pandemic (See advice paper on School Connectedness during COVID-19).

What should Education Staff do on hearing a child or family have experienced a recent bereavement?

Dr Bruce Perry calls educators '*an emotional bridge*' for grieving children and stresses the crucial role they have in supporting a child to reshape key relationships following the loss i.e. the relationship between the child and staff member, and also the relationships the child has with their peers. There are a number of UK charities that specialise in the support of bereaved children and they highlight the vital role that educators play in supporting grieving children.

Child Bereavement UK have developed a range of downloads for education staff, they include:

- A child's understanding of death dependent on their stage of development and additional support needs
- Managing grief

- Role of the school
- Death and grief in the curriculum
- Taking care of yourself

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/primary-schools>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/secondary-schools>

They have also developed a comprehensive 68 page guide '*Managing Bereavement – A Guide for Schools*'. This includes template letters and guidance around developing a bereavement policy. This guide is for both primary and secondary establishments. **We recommend that, as far as possible schools follow this advice.** In current circumstances, it would be helpful if the person who knows the family best from the school or ECC contacts the family and speaks with the child to ensure that they feel supported, as outlined in the guidelines below.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/managing-bereavement-a-guide-for-secondary-schools>

In addition to these guidelines, if the bereavement is complex for the school community, e.g. a member of staff has died or a child or young person has completed suicide, please refer to Appendix I for a protocol to follow.

Please note that the above guidelines talk about bereavement support groups. Psychological Services will be delivering training to ensure that staff who are comfortable to do so can deliver these groups in every school.

Winston's Wish is another UK bereavement charity who have developed comprehensive resources for educators, including ideas for whole class and individuals activities for children.

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/support-for-schools/>

Early Learning and Childcare

Child Bereavement UK provide some information specific to Early Years, including sections on contact with families, young children's need for appropriate and well timed information, and also grieving behaviour. <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/early-years-supporting-bereaved-children>

Winston's Wish have published a book '*Never too young to grieve: Supporting children under 5 after the death of a parent*'. The majority of the book is aimed at parents however there is

key information that would be helpful to ECC staff supporting a bereaved pre-school child.
<https://shop.winstonswish.org/collections/books/products/never-too-young-to-grieve>

Additional Support Needs

Staff supporting children with ASN may also find the resources below helpful:

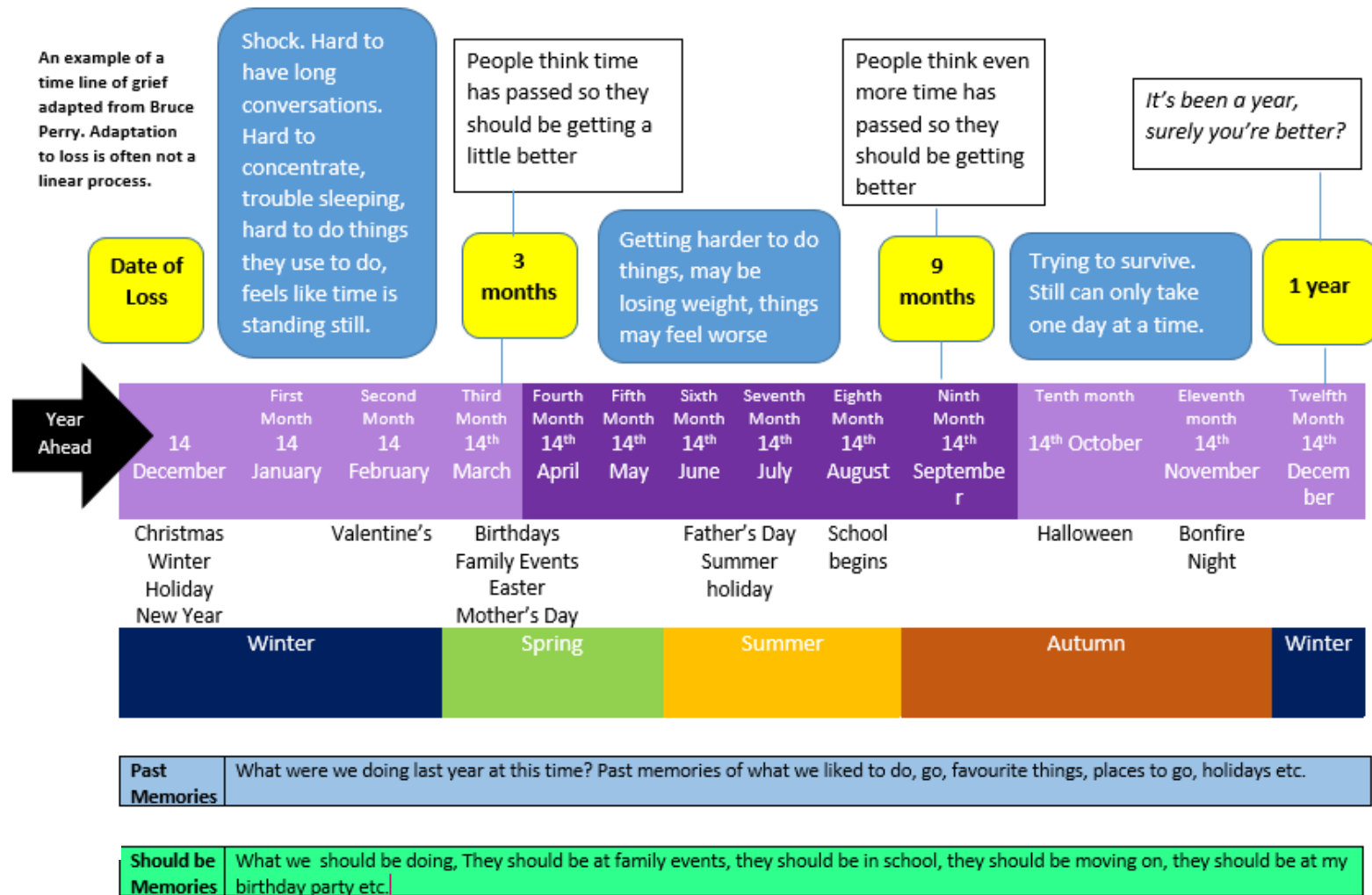
<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-a-bereaved-child-with-autism-spectrum-disorder>

The organisation PAMIS (Promoting a More Inclusive Society) have created a Bereavement and Loss Learning Resource (2014) tailored to the needs of people with Complex Learning Difficulties

<http://pamis.org.uk/resources/bereavement-and-loss/>

Supporting a grieving child's needs across time

'For most children, loss and fear go hand in hand. They do not know what will happen to them. And fear intensifies and complicates the other emotions associated with loss. The fearful child cannot concentrate in school; will misinterpret comments; and will sometimes regress to immature behaviour' Dr Bruce Perry



Immediately following a significant loss a child is likely to feel a sense of numbness and disbelief. This is likely to be subsequently replaced by anxiety. With adequate support the child's anxiety should peak then decrease. For some children this may present as anger or defiance. However, it is when the anxiety decreases that feelings of sadness are likely to increase. This is not reflective of the efforts of staff supporting the child.

It is worth remembering that grieving is a natural response and it is important that we do not pathologise it. Everyone's experience of grief is both unique and individual to them and there are no limits on how long this time will last. However, for some grieving children, their feelings can be prolonged and become all-consuming rendering them unable to move forward with their grief. Professionals recognise this as complicated bereavement. Experiencing a more complex grief process can be the result of:

- Relationship factors - losing a parent, main care giver, sibling or best friend
- Circumstantial factors – sudden or unexpected loss
- Multiple losses – the person has experienced a loss previously or loses a number of loved ones close to them at once.
- Individual factors – lack of emotional resourcefulness or resilience
- Social factors – poverty and chaotic home environments, lack of social networks

It is important to note that not all children who are subject to these factors will develop complex grief reactions and that all bereaved children can be at risk of complex grief despite not having existing vulnerabilities.

Symptoms and indicators of prolonged grief:

1. Frequent trouble accepting the death
2. Inability to trust others since
3. Excessive bitterness related to the death
4. Uneasiness about moving on with life
5. Detachment from those whom they were previously close
6. Prolonged feeling that life is meaningless
7. View that the future does not hold the prospect of fulfilment
8. Excessive or prolonged agitation

As mentioned earlier, the majority of children who experience loss can have their needs met by trusted, familiar adults. However, if you suspect a child is 'stuck' in their grief and has made little or no progress over time then they may benefit from more targeted supports from education, health or the third sector. Discuss your concerns with your Educational Psychologist, should you have any worries about a child that may be experiencing complex grief and require support.

Practitioner Self Care

Being involved in supporting a child through grief can take its toll on our own mental wellbeing at the best of times. In the current times of anxiety and uncertainty, when many of our usual supports networks are limited, it is particularly important to ensure that we are emotionally well enough to guide children through

the challenging times ahead. Research indicates that the following steps can be helpful in the promotion and maintenance of teacher mental wellbeing:

1. Know your personal limits and be able to say 'no' when necessary.
2. Identify your support network (inside and outside of school). You could also speak with a professional for support.
3. Talking is hugely important. If you've had a challenging day try to speak with a trusted colleague.
4. Allowing a little self-compassion by challenging the critical voice that is often in our thoughts.

(Anna Freud, National Centre for Children and Families)

Further guidance on supporting your own wellbeing during COVID-19, is outlined in this document Teacher Resilience form the British Psychological Society.

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Member%20Networks/Divisions/DECP/Teacher%20resilience%20during%20coronavirus%20school%20closures.pdf>

Whilst the prospect of supporting a grieving child may seem daunting, it is worth remembering the crucial difference that having predictable, reliable and empathic adults can make to any children experiencing adversity. Whilst there are noted associations between childhood bereavement and difficulties in later life, it is important to know that the majority of children adjust and cope well with the change in their life.

Resources and Supports Available in Scotland

Beautiful Inside and Out – charity that works locally to provide free counselling, therapy and drop ins for those bereaved or impacted by suicide. 07984328808. Can also be contacted via Facebook Charity Page.

Childhood Bereavement UK – support and advice for families, children and young people
www.childbereavementuk.org 0800 0288840

NB. Additional resources including a short film about supporting bereaved children during the COVID 19 pandemic www.childbereavementuk.org/coronavirus-supporting-children

Young Minds www.youngminds.org.uk Parent helpline 08088025544

Childline 24hour national helpline (free) for children and young people covers all issues 0800 1111
www.childline.org.uk

Young Scot: provides a wealth of information to help support young people during COVID 19.
<https://young.scot/campaigns/national/coronavirus>

Heads Up: has information about some common mental health conditions, and includes advice and tips on ways on how people can cope with living with the condition. <http://headsup.scot/>

Cruse: information on dealing with bereavement and grief during COVID 19
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

Beyond Words: when someone dies from corona virus: a guide for families and carers.
<https://booksbeyondwords.co.uk/downloads-shop/when-someone-dies-from-coronavirus>

NHS Living Life: 0800 328 9655: A free telephone based service for people over the age of 16 feeling low, anxious or stressed

Samaritans: 116 123. A free and confidential support to anyone, any age

Breathing Space – phonenumber for anyone experiencing low mood or anxiety - 0800838587

Families Outside – support for families affected by imprisonment 0141 230 6123
www.familiesoutside.org.uk

Marie Curie Cancer Care – information for parents and carers www.mariecurie.org.uk 0131 561 3900

Winston's Wish – charity to support bereaved children and young people. Website with advice and support
www.winstonswish.org.uk 08088020021

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide - emotional and practical support following a suicide www.uk-sobs.org.uk 0844 561 6855 (9am – 9pm)

PETAL (People Experiencing Trauma and Loss) – support for people affected by murder or suicide in Scotland – 01698 324 502 – www.petalsupport.com

Children 1st Kinship Care Service – support and advice for kinship carers to meet needs of children and young people - 08000282233

Appendix 1: Critical Incident in the school or ECC community during COVID-19 Physical Distancing

Psychological Advice with regards to planning and support in the event of a loss or bereavement on a whole establishment basis during COVID-19

This practical guidance or 'to do' list has been written from both an evidence base of Critical Incidents in school communities and our experience of what school communities have found most helpful while experiencing critical incidents around bereavement or loss here in East Ayrshire. Clearly this is much more difficult when physically distant from our children and young people. Please do not hesitate to contact psychological services should you have any questions or concerns at all. This guidance applies when there is a complex bereavement within a school community. For example the loss of a member of the school or ECC team or the loss of a child or young person within the school or ECC community.

First 24 hours

1. Contact

- The affected family or families
- Relevant staff members and support agencies
- The Educational Psychologist for advice and support to the establishment
- Inform other establishments in the locality who may also have children and young people , families or staff who could be affected

Listen, empathise and support

2. Create a plan

- A designated response / support team depending on the size of the establishment and the nature of the incident which may include:
 - A known or trusted member of staff
 - A member(s) of SLT who will also act as a designated liaison or communication officer co-ordinating support
 - Partner agencies
- A dedicated incoming phone line or email which should only be shared with key people and agencies.
- A response statement for staff to ensure that all the verified information is shared appropriately thus creating a consistent and accurate understanding of the facts. This avoids any misunderstandings or rumours which may circulate, particularly via social media.
- A plan for resource deployment should this be required.

Hold all of the above action points in your action plan

3. Inform – Consistent Communication

Staff

- Telephone individual staff who may be most affected by the news.
- Convene a video meeting or group telephone call with all staff (teachers, support staff, clerical and ancillary) or if this is not possible, a series of telephone calls with available or relevant staff.
- Agree SLT point of contact for groups of staff, if required in the circumstances
- Share the agreed response statement with all relevant staff. Brief staff on what they should tell children and young people, and what their role should be. Emphasise the importance of maintaining consistent communication.
- Advise all staff that if approached by a member of press that they do not respond. If this is a likely situation, all communication come from EA communications team.
- Brief staff on the possible reaction from children and young people, and the community, and provide relevant information and web links on how to be available to support this (see within this document)
- Make sure staff are aware of the supports available to children and young people
- Ensure sensitivity to cultural and religious diversity
- Advise children and young people and staff of the need for confidentiality and respect for the wishes of the family

Parents/Wider Community

- Individual response directly to parents / family – possible telephone contact with other affected families and/or witnesses – contact schools where siblings or extended family attend
- While socially isolating it would be important, in keeping with the bereaved family's wishes of course, to inform all other families through your usual communication channels in order that they might best support their child(ren)
- Authority response: Seek guidance from Senior Education Managers and Psychological Services regarding a collective response via letter or email

Children and young people

- Inform children and young people most affected first, and separately from their wider peers, using the agreed response statement to sensitively guide this interaction. This should ideally be done by staff who know the children and young people best. In current circumstances it would be helpful to call parents or carers first to allow them to prepare to support their child or children within the home.
- When appropriate inform all children and young people. This should be done on a class to class basis rather than a full assembly and should be conducted by a class teacher/key adult who knows them best e.g. class/group/guidance teacher. Remind staff to use the prompt response you have agreed previously. Again, in current circumstance this may be in a communication to parents and carers first. This may

require to be a written communication by stage of development in the current circumstances for parents or carers to share with the child and, if so, please liaise with Psychological Services to support.

Support

For Staff

As far as possible provide appropriate opportunity for staff to:

- Ask questions
- Gather information and dispel rumours
- Share information
- Meet informally for peer support
- Meet for a debrief or review (voluntary attendance)

For children and young people (directly and indirectly affected)

- Provide **Psychological Advice to Parents and Carers** document, should they be happy to receive this.
- Make them or their parents and carers aware of school, community and online support measures depending on their age and stage
- A known contact in school if required (Note: school support should be allocated on a voluntary basis)

4. At the end of Day One

Review

- Offer a group call or telephone group call to all staff who are involved or affected by the incident
- This process should be facilitated by a member of the response / support team
- Attendance is voluntarily and ideally should be conducted in small groups of 8 – 10 adults

The main aim of the review is to:

- Allow staff to share experiences
- Review facts surrounding the incident
- Identify self-care strategies
- Reduce the likelihood of prolonged adverse stress reactions through provision of a sense of closure on the day's events
- Provide signposting to available support both in the short and longer term

This might be harder for staff to feel comfortable doing when practising social isolation. As such, this will likely require to be revisited when schools physically reopen.

Consideration at this point should also be given to the next few days while trying to anticipate what the next stages of action might look like in terms of:

- Children, young people and wider community reaction – the grieving process; the possibility of feelings re-emerging from associated previous personal loss; feelings of despair, helplessness and anger
- The need to do something positive as part of managing those associated feelings and how to manage this sensitively
- The immediate and envisaged longer term family, school and community support networks
- The wishes of the family relating to the level of school involvement e.g. marking the bereavement without being able to attend a funeral
- The need for children and young people to grieve and represent their feelings through community tributes – flowers, memorials, get-togethers (*bear in mind the stress of current Co-vid19 restrictions – online, video tributes may help but also require some scrutiny*) and how this might be sensitively supported

5. The next 24 – 48 hours

It is important to maintain the normal structure and routines for all affected children and young people while recognising that children and young people and staff might need family, community or, in a few instances, specialist support. Establishments will already have robust systems in place regarding emotional containment and reassurance for children and young people, families and staff on an ongoing basis. There will be highly skilled and experienced practitioners already familiar with change and loss but we need to recognise that the staff team may also require direct or indirect support. Particularly in light of physical distancing.

Providing emotional containment and reassurance for distressed children and young people can be challenging and potentially draining. It may also trigger emotional responses from previous adverse experiences. Continuing to provide time and space for both children and young people and staff to talk is important and a real challenge in current circumstances. Ensuring children and staff have ways of contacting key staff while physically distant and agreed 'check in' points may be helpful.

6. Begin Day 2 and 3 by:

- Providing a short check-in with key staff to review the feeling in the whole school and update the action plan
- Re-emphasise that staff should be alert to children and young people who indicate a desire to talk via agreed check ins or through increased telephone contact. The importance of 'being available' and 'actively listening' cannot be overestimated
- Communicate updated information to key staff as soon as it is readily available
- Clarify and coordinate the role of external agencies. Plan for provision of short and long term consultation with the Educational Psychology Service as circumstances merit

- If general advice relating to the loss or bereavement was not circulated to parents/carers, consider if this may still be required. Consult with the Senior Education Manager prior to the release of any correspondence
- Arrange a staff de-brief and review at the end of Day 2 and 3
- Review the Action Plan as required (ongoing)

7. Longer Term Planning

- Ensure practitioners monitor and assess children and young people experiencing distress, and alert senior leadership and/or pastoral support link of potential concerns as timeously as possible.
- Raise the Critical Incident as part of the agenda at SLT, staff meetings and/or Pastoral Support team meetings until it is agreed by the team that it is no longer required.
- Review risk management procedures/children's plans as necessary.
- Check mailing lists, email lists and texting lists and remove name(s) from databases to avoid the distress of sending mail to the bereaved.
- Inform any contact services which may have had involvement with the young person e.g. careers service, school nurse, UCAS, multi-agency professionals to avoid the distress of sending mail to bereaved families.
- Once physical distancing allows it, make a home visit to the bereaved/affected family/families or a telephone call if it does not allow. Again, undertake this only if the family are content to receive this. The timing and personnel involved is for management discretion following consent of the family/families involved. It is recommended that two members of staff make the visit to provide mutual support.
- Consult with parents on the appropriateness of a school or ECC memorial e.g. garden memorial, fund raising, school award, book of memories etc.
- Advise staff not to remove the child's displayed work or make changes to the child's desk/workspace until there is a natural break in the academic session, typically at the end of a term. Make sure the work is stored should the family request it.

Should you have any questions at all about this guidance please do not hesitate to contact Psychological Services.