



HEALTHIER MINDS

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCIL

A Community Approach to Supporting Bereavement, Loss and Grief



Guidance for Primary Staff



Contents

This guidance is for the use of Primary School staff who are supporting children and families who have experienced a loss or bereavement. It is adapted from the Healthier Minds: A Community Approach to Supporting Bereavement, Loss and Grief. Guidance for Educational Establishments. Further information, this document and other supporting resources can be found at <https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/meetinglearnerneeds/support-for-health-and-wellbeing/support-for-bereavement-and-loss/>

Role of Primary Staff in Supporting Children and Families

A child's primary school provides a safe place to play, create, discuss and explore feelings of loss, but staff may be reluctant to engage in these conversations due to a lack of confidence. They may be concerned about making the situation worse or saying the wrong thing.

The following principles should be embedded in practice to aid the thinking of staff when supporting bereaved children:

Normality

For the majority of children suffering a significant change in their life, the routines of school can give a sense of normality. The familiarity of attending school with familiar people offers a sense of security, continuity and reassurance. It is good to maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility.

Relief from Grief

The school environment can provide relief from a tense and emotionally charged atmosphere at home. Children may feel overwhelmed by the grief expressed by family members. Alternatively, family members may attempt to not express grief in front of the child. Even very young children, however, can sense and, will react to, the emotions of others.

An Outlet for Grief

When a parent or sibling has died, children and young people can try to protect their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and pretending to cope. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief. Family members struggling to deal with their own grief can find it difficult to support their child's grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm. It is important that children are encouraged to express their grief in a way that suits them, whether talking or using more creative means.

Nurture and Connection

Children often worry that other adults in their life will also die or leave or

that they are to blame for the death and so it is important that children are reassured that they are loved, they are not responsible and will be looked after. A close attachment with at least one adult will reduce the impact of a loss or bereavement. Attunement is key in this relationship to ensure the adult can respond to the changing needs of the child. It is normal for children to jump between periods of sadness and their normal behaviour

so the adult has an important role in encouraging fun and play, providing comfort when required and taking time to answer the child's questions as honestly as possible.

Remember:

Answer questions as honestly as you can.

Use clear language such as 'dead' 'death' 'dying' and avoid euphemisms such as 'passed away' or 'gone to sleep'.

The Opportunity to be a Child












Children often take on more adult responsibilities in the house, so school offers the chance to play, laugh and generally just be a child without feeling guilty. Evidence suggests that play allows a child to express, understand and process emotions and is, therefore, a vital activity for bereaved children to help them cope with loss (Saracho and Spodek, 1995).

Developing Resilience

Create opportunities to discuss issues surrounding loss, bereavement and grief. While it is not possible to fully prepare children for death and the impact that bereavement can have, children can develop resilience and coping strategies through stories, activities and discussions. You will find example lesson plans in the appendix. It will be useful to have a selection of resources on the subject of loss and death available. Books, film clips and discussing personal experiences are all effective ways to gently introduce the concept of loss.

Planning Additional Support

The additional support that a child will need in school will vary and should be discussed with the parents/carers and, where possible, with the child. Some children will prefer to have no adaptations made and will wish to return to their normal routine. This, however, may change over time so staff should be alert and responsive to any indications, however subtle, that the child is struggling. The following supports should be considered:

-  Discuss with the family and if possible the child what information they want shared with children in the class/school, how they want this to be shared and how comfortable the child is discussing the loss with others.
-  Break cards - young people often feel embarrassed about showing their emotions and do not want to cry in front of their peers, by offering time away from the class, the child may feel more comfortable to express their grief.
-  Access to a consistent, quiet space with preferred, comforting activities when a break is required.
-  Regular check-ins and support from an identified member of staff – this could take a variety of forms and should be directed by the needs and wishes of the child or young person.
-  Transition objects – a child who is concerned about the safety of surviving family members may benefit from bringing a special object from home, a drawing, message or photograph.
-  Clarity of routines and schedules – individual timetables, preparing for transitions, visual timers and clarifying finish times can help to reduce stress.
-  Explaining loss – depending on the child's age and ability he/she may need additional support to understand the loss using social stories, story books, video clips (examples are provided in this guidance)
-  Adapted timetable – the child may benefit from planned breaks on a temporary basis.
-  Modified expectations regarding academic progress – a child who has experienced loss may also struggle with focus and attention, motivation and energy all of which could affect their presentation at school. This may not be apparent straight away.
-  Reduced homework – home life may be more chaotic or disrupted than usual so reducing pressure on completing homework temporarily can relieve a potential source of stress.
-  Peer support from a friend or an older pupil to reduce social

isolation. This would need to be carefully planned, agreed in advance by all parties and support considered for the peer supporter.

- 📌 Child Focused Assessment – as with any additional support need, what the child requires following a loss will depend on ongoing contextualised assessment of how the child presents and close collaboration with those who know the child best.

Home-School Communication

Systems should be in place to keep in contact with home. Discuss plans for returning to school and keep in touch about progress and supports. Grieving children can present differently across settings. Good communication will ensure a more realistic picture of how the child is coping is shared and planned for. Discuss with the parents/carers what the child knows about the death so that you are both providing consistent information and answers to the child's questions.

Supporting Parents

Parents will often seek support and reassurance from school staff in terms of how their child is managing, but they may also seek support for their own grief. In these situations accept that you can't fix the situation or make the person feel better but you can listen. Reassure parents that it is normal for their child to experience a full range of emotions, to regress in some behaviours, to ask a lot of questions and at other times behave as if nothing has happened.

The Day Becca Died is a short clip which can help parents supporting a bereaved child.

Taking Care of Yourself








Talking to a child about loss or the death of someone close may be one of the hardest things a teacher will ever have to do. It may produce painful emotions and memories and SMTs must ensure there are formal and informal systems in place to support staff who are providing this support to children and families.

Administrative Considerations

Ensure the names and contact details of the deceased person are removed to avoid any accidental correspondence. Special events for example, birthdays, Christmas, Mother's and Father's Day may be particularly difficult so it is important staff are made aware of the loss even many years after. Pass on information at times of transition to ensure future staff members are aware of the circumstances and can provide further supports as necessary.

Remember to practice **Active Listening**:

Do's

-  Find a private space to talk
-  Present an open body stance and non-verbal signals to demonstrate you are listening
-  Listen in an accepting, non-judgemental way
-  Echo and reflect back what has been said
-  Tolerate silences
-  Offer reassurances about the normality of grief reactions
-  Encourage parents to talk to their children about the death

“I'm so sorry to hear about the death of your mum”



“It must have been so hard for you”

“I can imagine what a shock it would have been”

“It sounds like you have had trouble sleeping since it happened”

“It's normal for (your child) to still look for her grandpa. It might help if you can all talk about him when you're ready”

Avoid

-  Offering advice or solutions unless specifically asked for
-  Using comments like “I know how you are feeling” (even if you have experienced a similar loss)

“People avoided me because they didn’t know what to say. But they didn’t need to say anything just listen”

P7 Pupils

How Primary Aged Children Understand and Experience Death

Please also refer to the Guidance for ELC Staff for information pertaining to younger children

Children begin to develop the understanding that death is irreversible and something that happens eventually to all living things. Death may be regarded as something that is a bit 'spooky', and they may display what seems to be an unhealthy curiosity in the more morbid aspects of the death. Children at this age may complain of headaches, a sore tummy or other ailments. These are referred to as 'somatic' complaints and are generally physical manifestations of emotional pain. Behaviour may change, but it is important to encourage children at this age to express their feelings and understand that what they are feeling is perfectly natural.

Key Points

Children from 6 - 9 years:

- 🕒 understand that death is final, but see it as something that happens only to other people
- 🕒 may think of death as a person or a spirit, like a ghost, angel, or a skeleton
- 🕒 are often interested in the specific details of death and what happens to the body after death
- 🕒 may experience a range of emotions including guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, sadness
- 🕒 continue to have difficulty expressing their feelings and may react through behaviours such as school phobia, poor performance in school, aggression, physical symptoms, withdrawal from friends, and regression
- 🕒 still worry about who will take care of them and will likely experience insecurity, clinginess, and fear of abandonment
- 🕒 may still worry that they are to blame for the death

Children from 10 – 12 years:





- 🕒 by age 10 children understand that death is universal, unavoidable, and will happen to them
- 🕒 will experience a range of emotions and will start to worry about their own death
- 🕒 are likely to ask a lot of questions

Ways for Children to Remember

Finding ways to remember isn't only important after a death. Any loss for example moving house, parents separating or a friend moving away can be helped by finding creative ways to remember and cherish.

Memory Book, Box or Jar

Use a book, box or jar as a record and reminder. It could also be used more generally to highlight significant moments. The child might choose mementos which show:

-  happy events or occasions
-  messages and memories
-  photographs
-  possessions

This record can then be used to demonstrate the role of the person had in the child's life. This role will also be seen in a more general context of life progression as items can be added over time.

Planting Trees or Plants

Planting a tree or plant can be a good way of remembering the person who has died and provides a focal point for commemorating the life and death of the person.

Be Creative – artwork, photography, crafts, baking, poetry, songs, writing

Making something in memory of someone special or making it for that person helps us to feel connected to them and provides the bereaved person with something to treasure in the future. Everyone will find comfort in different mediums so explore which ones suit the child best.

Diary

Putting thoughts and feelings into words can be a therapeutic way of releasing some of the pain of the loss. It can be helpful to look back on.

Suggested Resources: Primary

| Lesson Plans, Ideas and Activities | |
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| <p>Film Clip</p> <p><u><i>The Day Becca Died</i></u></p> | <p>Short clip from Bereavement UK and CBeebies from the perspective of a family. Useful for anyone speaking to young children about death.</p> |
| <p>Elephant's Tea Party</p> <p>Child Bereavement UK</p> | <p>Lesson plans for equipping all children, whether bereaved or not, with the tools to help them cope with loss and bereavement, now or in later life.</p> <p><u>https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/elephants-tea-party</u></p> |
| <p>Mentally Healthy Schools</p> | <p>Website for primary schools, offering school staff information, advice and practical resources to better understand and promote pupils' mental health and wellbeing.</p> <p><u>https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/</u></p> |
| <p>Childhood Bereavement – developing the curriculum and pastoral support</p> <p>Job and Francis</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978 - 1904787143.</p> | <p>Using case studies and drawing on best practice, this resource aims to help those working in schools address bereavement from a pastoral and educational perspective. It provides lesson ideas for how to implement in the curriculum.</p> |
| <p>Good Grief – Exploring feelings, loss and death with under 11s</p> <p>B Ward</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978 - 1853023248.</p> | <p>Comprehensive guidance and information for classroom activities</p> |
| <p>The Resilience Project</p> | <p>Read about a project run in a Scottish primary school to integrate lessons around loss and death into the curriculum.</p> <p><u>https://www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk/content/resources/1525951432_The_Resilience_Project.pdf</u></p> |

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| DVDs | |
| <p><i>Grief in the Family</i></p> <p>Leeds Animation Workshop</p> <p>https://www.leedsanimation.org.uk/films/</p> | <p>Looks at the ways children and young people respond to grief, and what the adults around them can do to help. It gives parents and carers an insight into the process of grieving, its physical and emotional effects, and the needs of children and young people. The pack is designed as a resource for those working with families and bereaved children. It raises awareness and facilitates discussion in parenting education classes, training courses or schools. It is also suitable for viewing at home by parents, carers, and children.</p> |
| <p><i>It Will Be Ok</i></p> <p>Childhood Bereavement Network</p> <p>https://www.ncb.org.uk/product/220</p> | <p>Made by young people, this 15 minute film aims to help others in identifying emotions and behaviour common after a bereavement. It is intended to provide support to other bereaved children and young people by emphasising that they are not alone and that their feelings are normal. Suitable for bereaved children and young people to use in a supported environment. It is also a useful resource for the practitioners, parents and carers supporting them.</p> |
| <p><i>You'll Always Remember Them...</i></p> <p>Childhood Bereavement Network</p> <p>https://www.ncb.org.uk/product/267</p> | <p>This 40 minute film features a group of children from a range of backgrounds aged 6-12 who have been bereaved of a parent. The group discusses the impact of bereavement on their lives, the support they received from family, friends, hospitals, bereavement service providers and schools.</p> <p>Can be used as a resource to offer information and support, facilitate training and discussion or develop the understanding of children and young people through the PSHE curriculum in schools.</p> |

Books for Educational Professionals

Then, Now and Always: Supporting Children as They Journey Through Grief: A Guide for Practitioners (Winstons Wish)

Julia A Stokes

Amazon ISBN 13: 978 - 0953912353

Most suitable for those with pastoral care responsibilities, this guide for supporting children as they journey through grief includes a section on enabling a school community to respond positively to a death.

Supporting Children through Grief and Loss: Practical Ideas and Creative Activities for Schools and Carers

Anna Jacobs

Amazon ISBN 13: 978-1906531539

Provides advice and helpful suggestions for those supporting children through bereavement and loss. Provides an overview of different behaviours you may encounter in school and how to respond, as well as discussing questions children may ask and how to answer them. Age-appropriate, honest responses along with a toolkit of creative and arts activities to help children examine and understand their emotions, physical feelings and memories.

A Child's Grief. Supporting a child when someone in their family has died (Winston's Wish)

Stubbs and Stokes

Amazon ISBN 978-0955953934

Useful and informative introduction for professionals and carers supporting a child through bereavement. Covers a variety of short and long term issues. Offers practical suggestions and ideas for activities.

Books for use with Bereaved Children and Young People

Muddles, Puddles and Sunshine: An Activity Book

Diana Crossley

Amazon ISBN 13: 978 - 1869890582.

This activity book offers invaluable practical and sensitive support for bereaved young children. The book offers a structure and an outlet for the many difficult feelings which inevitably follow when someone dies. It aims to help children make sense of their experience by reflecting on the different aspects of their grief. At the same time, the book manages to find a balance between remembering the person who has died and having fun.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children

Mellonie and Ingpen

A book which aims to help parents and teachers explore the subjects of life and death with young children considering beginnings, endings and the life in between. Introduces the concepts through animals, plants and people.

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| <p><i>What on Earth do you do when Someone Dies?</i></p> <p>Trevor Romain</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-1575420554</p> | <p>This book for older children is a factual guide, answering questions such as 'Why do people have to die?', 'is it okay to cry?' and 'what is a funeral/memorial service?' It is written in a straightforward way, with practical tips, advice and information about different faiths and beliefs.</p> |
| <p><i>Michael Rosen's SAD Book</i></p> <p>Michael Rosen</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-1406313161.</p> | <p>This book has large illustrations and small snippets of text. It is wonderfully honest and will appeal to children and adults of all ages. We all have sad stuff, but what makes Michael Rosen most sad is thinking about his son who died. This book is a simple but emotive story. He talks about what sad is and how it affects him and what he does to cope with it.</p> |
| <p><i>When Someone Very Special Dies</i></p> <p>Marge Heegard</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-0962050206</p> | <p>A practical format for allowing children to understand the concept of death and develop coping skills for life, this book is designed for young readers to illustrate.</p> |
| <p><i>Finding a Way Through when Someone Close has Died</i></p> <p>Mood and Whittaker</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-1853029202</p> | <p>A workbook by young people who have experienced the death of someone close. They offer advice based on their own experiences. The activities encourage young people to express their feelings and responses.</p> |
| <p><i>Fiction Books</i></p> | |
| <p><i>The Memory Tree</i></p> <p>Britta Teckentrup</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-1408326343</p> | <p>Fox has lived a long and happy life in the forest, but now he is tired. He lies down in his favourite clearing, and falls asleep for ever. Before long, Fox's friends begin to gather in the clearing. One by one, they tell stories of the special moments that they shared with Fox. And so, as they share their memories, a tree begins to grow, becoming bigger and stronger with each memory, sheltering and protecting all the animals in the forest, just as Fox did when he was alive.</p> |
| <p><i>Grandad's Island</i></p> <p><i>Benji Davies</i></p> | <p>At the bottom of Syd's garden is Grandad's house. Syd can let himself in any time he likes. But one day when Syd comes to call, Grandad is in the attic, where he ushers Syd through a door, and the two of</p> |

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| <p>Amazon ISBN 978-1471119958</p> | <p>them journey to a wild, beautiful island awash in colour where Grandad decides he will remain. So Syd hugs Grandad one last time and sets sail for home. Sure to provide comfort to young children struggling to understand loss.</p> |
| <p><i>The Sad Dragon: A Dragon Book about Grief and Loss</i></p> <p>Steven Hermen</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-1948040990</p> | <p>Having a pet dragon is very fun! He can sit, roll over, and play. But sometimes, not every story is a happy one. What if your dragon is suffering from a loss of a loved one? What should you do? You teach him about Grief and Loss. You explain death to him, and help him get through this difficult time!</p> |
| <p><i>The Invisible String</i></p> <p>Patricia Karst</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-0875167343.</p> | <p>A heartwarming story that reassures children that even though they can't always be with a loved one, they're always in each other's hearts. Whenever a child thinks about a family member, the invisible string gives a tug. Explores the issues of loss and separation.</p> |
| <p><i>Missing Mummy</i></p> <p>Rebecca Cobb</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-0230749511</p> | <p>Deals with the loss of a parent from a child's point of view. Perfectly pitched text and evocative artwork explore the many emotions a bereaved child may experience, from anger to guilt and from sadness to bewilderment. And importantly, the book also focuses on the positive - the recognition that the child is still part of a family, and that his memories of his mother are to be treasured.</p> |
| <p><i>Always and Forever</i></p> <p>Alan Durant</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-0552548779.</p> | <p>Otter, Mole and Hare miss Fox when he falls ill and dies. They stay at home and don't want to talk about him because it makes them sadder. Then Squirrel visits and reminds them of all the fun times they had together.</p> |
| <p><i>Badger's Parting Gifts</i></p> <p>Susan Varley</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-0006643173.</p> | <p>Badger is old and knows he is going to die soon. When he does, the other animals think they will be sad forever, but they begin to talk about the memories they have of the things Badger taught them and learn to cope with his death. A lovely picture book that emphasises the importance of holding on to memories.</p> |
| <p><i>Flamingo Dream</i></p> | <p>In this bright and colourful book, a young boy tells the story of his Dad who is seriously ill and dies soon</p> |

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| <p>Donna Jo Napoli</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-0688167967</p> | <p>after a trip to Florida to see the place where he grew up. The collage style illustrations capture the things the boy collects to remind him of his Dad. A sensitive but honest book which emphasises the importance of memories.</p> |
| <p>Fred</p> <p>Posy Simmonds</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978 - 0099264125</p> | <p>Fred's owners, Sophie and Nick, think he is the laziest cat in the world, but who knows what goes on after dark? It's only after their beloved pet dies, that they discover he has been leading an exciting double life.</p> |
| <p>Saying Goodbye: A Special Farewell to Mama Nkwelle</p> <p>Frances Lincoln</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-0711217010</p> | <p>This book has large bright colourful photos and follows a little boy, Ikenna describing what happens at the ceremony after his great-grandmother's funeral. It gives ideas of different ways to remember someone and an insight into Nigerian culture. A lovely book that could be used in many different situations, including schools</p> |
| <p>The Huge Bag of Worries</p> <p>Virginia Ironside</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-0340903179</p> | <p>Jenny begins to worry about lots of different things and these worries build up and get out of control. She just can't get rid of them, until she meets the old lady next door who helps her feel better. A lovely story with fun illustrations encourages children to talk about their worries.</p> |
| <p>The Tenth Good Thing about Barney</p> <p>Judith Viorst.</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 978-0689712036</p> | <p>A young boy's cat dies and his parents suggest that he could think of ten good things about Barney to tell at the funeral. But he can only think of nine, until he talks to his father about what happens to someone after they have died, and he discovers the tenth. Sensitively deals with death and lets the reader make his or her own decisions about what happens after the funeral</p> |
| <p>The Cat Mummy</p> <p>Jacqueline Wilson</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-0440864165.</p> | <p>Verity's Mum died the day she was born but she rarely talks about her. Verity doesn't want to upset her Dad or Grandparents. This humorous but sensitive story mainly focuses on Verity's missing cat Mabel but reveals some of the misunderstandings and anxieties children can have about death. It also shows it can be good to be open, honest and to talk about difficult issues</p> |

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| <p><i>Milly's Bug Net</i></p> <p>Jill Janey</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 9780953912346</p> | <p>A short, simple story with black and white pictures, of a young girl whose dad has died. It talks about the ups and downs of family life and how things slowly get easier as time goes</p> |
| <p><i>Ways to Live Forever</i></p> <p>Sally Nichols</p> <p>Amazon ISBN 13: 978-1407105154</p> | <p>If I grow up," 11-year-old Sam informs readers, "I'm going to be a scientist." He says "if" because he has acute lymphoblastic leukaemia and knows he probably won't. With the encouragement of his tutor, he start to write a bit about himself, then more, until he is using his writing to sort out his death.</p> |
| <p><i>Luna's Red Hat: An Illustrated Storybook to Help Children Cope with Loss and Suicide (6+)</i></p> <p><i>Emmi Smid</i></p> <p>Amazon ISBN-13: 978-1849056298</p> | <p>Luna's Mum died one year ago and she still finds it difficult to understand why. She feels that it may have been her fault and worries that her Dad might leave her in the same way. Her Dad talks to her to explain what happened and together they think about all the happy memories they have of Mum.</p> <p>This beautifully-illustrated storybook is designed as a tool to be read with children aged 6+ who have experienced the loss of a loved one by suicide.</p> |

John and Chris's Story - Example of Good Practice in an East Renfrewshire Primary School

The following illustrates the response of school staff to [the death of a staff member who also had 2 grandchildren \(John and Chris\) at the school.](#)

Immediately following the news of the death

- Condolences were sent to the family on behalf of the whole school staff team
- All staff were informed prior to coming into school
- The Head teacher informs pupils by visiting each class to explain the staff member had died specifically using the word 'died' even with the youngest pupils
- A letter was sent to all parents
- The Quality Improvement Officer and Educational Psychologist for the school visited to offer support and guidance to the Senior Management Team around providing support and information to pupils, staff and families. It was agreed staff who are familiar to the children were best placed to offer support where necessary.

In the following days

- As many staff as possible attended the funeral
- The Head teacher kept in touch with John and Chris' parents to offer support and discuss their return to school

Medium Term - On the pupils' return to school

- John and Chris were offered a phased return to school
- Before returning to class, John and Chris discussed with their class teacher who they would like to speak to if they felt they needed to talk. They were advised that they could leave the class at any time
- A PSA and class teacher spent time ensuring the pupils were ok and their needs were being met on a day to day basis
- A familiar routine was maintained as far as possible
- The pupils were encouraged to focus on positive memories of their grandfather

Longer Term

- A Memorial Service was held at the school organised by pupils from the Eco Committee
- A bench was placed in the playground in memory of the staff member
- Staff remained mindful of the day to day needs of the pupils particularly around certain times of year and anniversaries
- During transition to Secondary School, information relating to John and Chris' bereavement was shared.