



Guidance for School and Local Authority Staff:

Providing Support after a Death

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1. WHOLE SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE DEATH OF A PUPIL OR STAFF MEMBER

- The person's death needs to be acknowledged and communicated to all staff, all pupils and parents at the earliest opportunity in a planned and appropriate way. (See guidance on communication following the death of a pupil)
- School staff will benefit from being provided with written guidance on how to talk to pupils about the person's death, and how to support pupils who are dealing with bereavement. It may also be helpful for parents to be provided with this information.
- Information on normal responses to trauma and loss should be made available to staff.
- Routine and normality provide a sense of safety and security for children and adults, a loss of routine is often anxiety provoking. With the exception of special events such as an assembly informing pupils of the death, a memorial service, and/or other activities to remember the child who has died and mark his or her passing, every effort should be made for school to continue to run as normally as possible. It may be appropriate to postpone certain events immediately following the child/young person's death, as a mark of respect and later rearrange for a future date.
- Some pupils will benefit from additional support in the early days. Providing forums for pupils to express their emotions: such as opportunities for class discussion, and/or provision of an area for pupils to go to if they are feeling particularly emotional and needing some time out to talk or express their emotions, shows pupils that it is normal to find bereavement difficult. Such arrangements can also contribute to lessons running smoothly for the majority of the time.
- It is helpful for staff and pupils to be involved in planning aspects of the schools response to the person's death. Giving different groups different areas to be responsible for supports everyone to feel included and give them a positive focus for their emotion. Ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to make a contribution, however small enhances the sense of community. Examples could include: writing poems or creating artwork either in memory of the child or to express feelings of loss, writing messages of support, or making cards for those who were closest to the child/young person who has died.
- It is useful for someone to be given the job of taking an overview of how everyone in school is feeling and checking that there aren't groups who feel that they are being ignored.
- It should be acknowledged that staff and pupils are doing really well to manage, and do such good work in difficult circumstances.

2. MANAGING COMMUNICATION IN SCHOOL FOLLOWING DEATH OF A PUPIL OR STAFF MEMBER

- The rationale for the whole school response needs to be explained to pupils and staff. After a death there may be people expressing their own opinions on how the school should respond, and criticising the decisions that have been made, this can cause division at a time when unity is important. Explain to staff, pupils and parents that the school will remain open because having a regular routine and going about usual daily business provides support and a sense of security, and because it is better for people to be together at troubled times rather than at home on their own.
- It is important to ensure that pupils and staff have the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about the pupil's death while maintaining respect for the privacy and wishes of the family.
- Where the cause of death is known and the family are in agreement for this to be shared, it would be appropriate for a brief explanation of the cause of death to be given, as this is then out in the open and there is no need for secrets or speculation. Excessive detail should not be given as this can be disturbing.
- Where information about the death is shared with pupils and staff, it should be made clear that they are being given this information as a member of the school community. Advise of the importance of respecting the bereaved family's privacy and the family's right to share the news of the death how and when they wish to do so. Explain to pupils and staff that it is appropriate for them to discuss the person's death in private with others in school, or with a family member, however, it would be disrespectful to share this news publically, particularly on social media, before the family have made the death public. Discourage pupils and their families from talking to the media. The Local Authority Communication Officers will take responsibility for dealing with the media and no other council employee should do so.
- There are often reasons why the cause of death cannot be shared with pupils and staff, particularly immediately after the event. For instance it may be due to the cause not being known, due to there being a degree of uncertainty about the cause of death, or because the family wish the cause of death to remain private. The following might be a useful script:
'[deceased child or young person's name] family have decided to keep how he/she died private and the school will be respecting their wishes regarding this. We ask you to respect their wishes too'
- It is important that the child, young person or staff member who is enquiring about the cause of death is given the opportunity to share their worries. They may have heard rumours that may or may not be true. Ask what he or she has heard or what he or she thinks might have happened. If they have heard or imagine that there was a particular cause of death: for example a violent incident, a road traffic accident or a suicide, then give them the opportunity to discuss this, maintaining the focus on how they are feeling and how they are coping, rather than speculation about the cause of death. Advise where they can access emotional support and relevant information.

Resources

The following resource is available in many schools in the Western Isles. It includes practical suggestions of how schools can respond, information about supporting bereaved pupils, information for staff on looking after themselves, and sample letters:

https://childbereavementuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/SALL0012_17_01-Schools-Information-Pack-with-cover.pdf

The following link will take you to a page on the CRUSE website with concise information about dealing with the death of a pupil:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/for-schools/death-of-a-pupil>

The following leaflet produced by the Press Complaints Commission provides advice on dealing with the media following a death:

http://www.pcc.org.uk/assets/482/PCC_guidance_following_a_death.pdf

3. CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO BEREAVEMENT

- Children, particularly young children often have little or no experience of loss on which to base their coping.
- Children can find a person's death confusing and distressing. Children might find it hard to believe that the person is gone and won't come back.
- If the person who dies is someone close to them a child's sense of security could be shaken, the child may become anxious about things that they didn't worry about before.
- Sometimes children regress following a bereavement and start to behave in the way a much younger child might be expected to behave.
- Children grieve in a very real way, their grieving will differ from that of adults. Children grieve according to their developmental stage, and according to their understanding of death.
- A child may feel:
 - hurt that the person is gone
 - angry with the person for leaving them
 - guilty, perhaps thinking that something they said or did that caused the person to die, or because they are remembering times when they weren't kind to the person.
 - sad and tearful one minute and happy and playful the next
- A child might respond in the following ways:
 - Tiredness
 - Mood swings
 - Regression and loss of skills
 - Anger and frustration, which might be shown in physical or verbal aggressive behaviour
 - High risk behaviour
- Lack of response, for some children grief may be delayed until some time after the person's death.

Resources

The following link is to a concise leaflet about children's experience of grief, on the CRUSE Bereavement Care Scotland website:

http://www.crusescotland.org.uk/images/pdfs/Time_with_the_children.pdf

Information on children's grieving at different ages can be found on the Child Bereavement UK website:

http://support.childbereavement.org.uk/files/images/10__A.pdf

4. SUPPORTING A CHILD THROUGH A BEREAVEMENT

- Children are better prepared for bereavement if, throughout childhood, they have had experiences that develop their understanding that death is natural, and is part of the life cycle of all living things. It is good for adults to be open to children's natural curiosity, for example when the child has experiences of dead things such as seeing a dead bird on the way to school, or noticing that a plant has died, honestly answering the child's questions if they ask '*Do people die?*', '*Will I die one day?*' while giving reassurance. For example saying '*Yes, death comes at the end of everyone's life, but you have a lot of life to come yet*'. Children are more likely to become fearful of death if adults seem afraid to talk about it and are secretive about it rather than treating it as a topic that can be openly discussed.
- Be honest with children, telling them inaccurate versions of death such as that the deceased person has '*fallen asleep*' can cause them further confusion, and might make them fearful of sleeping in case they don't wake up. Saying '*we've lost them*' might make them wonder why no one is looking for the person. Explain death to the child in a way that the child will understand. You may wish to have some discussion with the child's parents regarding how they have explained the death to the child. It is important to take account of the child and family's beliefs, however, and for very young children hearing about different beliefs might be confusing, however, as children get older it is useful for them to learn that different people have different beliefs about death.
- It is hard to see a child upset, however, grief is natural and needs to be expressed. With support and information children can be helped to understand what has happened, and what this means for them. They can begin to gradually live with their loss.
- Answer children's questions about the death and about death in general. Tell them the basic facts that you know if the death is unexplained tell them that you don't know. Answer their questions if you can, there is no need to give them excessive detail, instead focus on how the child feels and what the child thinks. Ask the child if anything is worrying them so that they have the opportunity to talk about their worries and be reassured.

Resources

The following link provides information on what different people can do to support a bereaved child:

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/children/how-to-help>

The following provide information on supporting bereaved children:

https://www.cruse.org.uk/sites/default/files/default_images/pdf/Free-leaflets/SupportChildGrief.pdf

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/>

5. UNDERSTANDING BEREAVEMENT

Grief is individual, different people respond differently. How someone is affected can be influenced by their previous experience, a death of someone can remind them of previous bereavements and losses.

Feelings

Following a bereavement a person might experience very strong feelings. At times the bereaved person might feel that he or she is losing control, getting confused or 'going mad', or experience panic attacks. Alternatively he or she might feel numb as if the world is going on around him or her without them being part of it.

A bereaved person may experience a range of feelings including some of the following:

Fear

- Of being alone
- For his or her own safety
- For the safety of others

Sadness

- About the life the deceased person is missing out on
- About other deaths and losses
- About the things he or she will miss out on because the person isn't here.

Guilt

- For still being alive
- For not having done more to protect or save others
- For things he or she has said or done, or not said and done in relation to the person who has died

Shame

- For being seen to be emotional and needing others
- For not having reacted or behaved as he or she thinks should have done, or would have liked to have done

Numbness

- The event may seem unreal, like a dream
- He or she may feel it hasn't really happened, or has happened to someone else

Hopeless

- He or she may feel empty and hopeless about the future
 - He or she may feel that life isn't worth living
- It is important that anyone who has these feelings talks to someone about them*

Anger

- About what has happened
- With him/herself
- Towards who he or she thinks may have caused the death or allowed it to happen
- About the injustice or senselessness of it
- About other people's lack of understanding

All of the feelings listed above are part of a normal grief reaction, however, if they continue for some time, affect the bereaved person's ability to cope with daily life and/or affect his or her relationship with others, it would be helpful for him or her to seek support from a counsellor or GP.

Thoughts

Grief can affect a person's thinking

Memory:

- Repeated and intrusive thoughts and memories of the person who has died, or about his or her death.
- Constant recall of other bereavements and losses.
- Recurring dreams and nightmares.
- Difficulty remembering things from prior to the bereavement, and difficulty remembering everyday things such as things people have said, or what he or she had planned to do.

Concentration:

- Difficulty focusing on everyday things
- Poor concentration, this can make a person more accident prone
- Feeling jumpy, restless and/or anxious

Being preoccupied with the event:

- Thinking a lot about the event and wanting to talk about the event.
- Constantly replaying the event in his/her mind.
- Questioning why the event happened and/or why the person died.

Behaviours

- Crying more frequently
- Crying in situations the person wouldn't have cried in before
- Avoiding situations, things or people who remind him/her of the person who has died or of what happened to them.

Physical Reactions

A person who has experienced bereavement may have the following physical reactions:

- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased heart rate
- Stomach upsets
- Exhaustion
- Frequently illness

These reactions usually pass, if they persist then the person should be advised to make an appointment to see their GP.

Impact on relationships

When someone is experiencing a bereavement he or she may feel that other people are finding it difficult to understand how he or she is feeling, what he or she is thinking and why he or she is behaving the way he or she is. This can leave the person feeling isolated even when he or she is with other people.

People might find it hard to talk to someone who has been bereaved, they can worry that they don't to know what to say to someone. Because of this they might find it easier to avoid the person. This can lead to people who have been bereaved feeling isolated.

Bereavement can bring people together, however, with emotions running high, tensions and disagreements can occur.

Advice for the bereaved person

What you can do

Look after yourself

Give yourself time to grieve, to acknowledge what has happened and to gradually recover from the shock and pain of what has happened. Try to be kind to yourself.

- Do things you find helpful, for example things that help you feel relaxed
- Spend time with people who you find supportive
- Get enough sleep
- Try to eat well
- Make sure you have a daily routine
- Set yourself realistic goals
- Share how you are feeling with others
- Cry if you feel the need to cry
- Do activities that you enjoy

- Seek help and support if you feel you need it. School will provide contact details for organisations who can provide support.
- Make an appointment to see your GP to discuss how you are if you continue to experience disturbing thoughts behaviours or emotions for more than six to eight weeks after the person's death and these are making it difficult for you to function at home, in work or school.

Things to avoid

- Avoid being ashamed or embarrassed about expressing emotion
- Avoid withdrawing from contact with friends and family
- Avoid seeing seeking support as a weakness, recognising that you need support and seeking this out can be a sign of strength.

Supporting others Following a bereavement

A death can shake people's sense of security and people can feel isolated in their grief. It is important that everything is in place to support people's sense of being part of the community, and connecting with others. Keeping routines running as usual can be beneficial.

It is important that the death is acknowledged and that people have the opportunity to express how they feel. Make opportunities for the person/people affected to express how they are feeling, and support them to find ways to express this in their own way, through talking to others, writing, artwork or poetry.

It could be useful to share the information about bereavement responses with the person themselves and with those around them to promote a shared understanding.

Advise people that following bereavement people feel emotional and this can lead people to find fault with others. Following bereavement it is important for everyone to do their best to be understanding of others, and to appreciate that other people may also be finding the situation difficult in their own way.

Resources

The following links are to information on coping with trauma:

https://www.cruse.org.uk/sites/default/files/default_images/pdf/Free-leaflets/CopingTrauma.pdf

<http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/copingafteratraumaticevent.aspx>

6. PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES

Death of a Parent or Carer

- It will be important for the child to be reassured and advised of what will now be happening at times the child would have spent with the parent or carer who has died. Reassure the child telling them who will now be caring for him or her.
- Arrangements and plans relating to the death should be shared with the child in a way that the child can understand. It is important that the child has the opportunity to be involved in the rituals of death in a way that is appropriate. A decision will need to be made regarding whether the child should view the body or go to the funeral. This will, to a large extent, depend on local, or family custom, however, the child's views should be taken into account when these decisions are made. If children are to attend the funeral they will need to be told what will happen, so that they know what to expect.
- Reassure the child that the person loved them and that that person's love will still be with them, in the happy memories the child has of doing things with that person and the things they learnt from that person.
- When a child asks a question asking the child what he or she thinks, can help you get a sense of his or her level of understanding which you can then build on with your response.
- Ask the child how he or she is feeling and ask what he or she misses about the person who has died.
- Keep talking about the person who has died: offering information, remembering memories and stories, and sharing feelings. This is one of the most important things you can do to help a child as they journey through grief. One of their greatest fears is that they will forget the person who died.
- Support the child to share their memories of the person who has died and things that they did together. Children can find it helpful to create a memory box. This can include, photographs, objects that belonged to the person who has died, and the child's drawings. Spending time with the child putting the memory box together creates an opportunity for the child to talk about his or her feelings.
- Mark special anniversaries with the child such as the parent or carer who has died birthdays, or Mothers or Fathers Day, by sharing memories, looking at photographs, or writing poems.

Resources Videos made by children whose parents have died:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-qFkRaPRYY&feature=youtu.be>

Drug or Alcohol Related Death

- Drug or alcohol related deaths include death through accidental overdose, the taking of drugs that are mixed with other substances, accidents that happen under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and deaths that come about through long term drug or alcohol use.
- Sometimes the bereaved person will not know that the person was taking drugs so the person's death will be entirely unexpected.
- If the person died while doing something that was out of character while under the influence of drugs or alcohol people may find it hard to believe or understand this.
- People might find it hard to talk about a drug or alcohol related death because of the stigma associated with this.
- Drug and alcohol addiction affect a person's behaviour. This may have led to strained relationships and leave the bereaved person feeling ambivalent about the death, making grieving more complex.

Resources: <https://www.cruse.org.uk/about-grief/drugs-and-alcohol>

Death in a violent incident

- Someone dying by murder or manslaughter can be particularly difficult for the bereaved to understand and process, as it can seem so unfair.
- Knowing that someone has been killed in a violent incident can cause anxiety about their own personal safety and the safety of others.
- If someone has been murdered whether as an individual or as part of a major incident and the perpetrator has not been apprehended this can be frightening for the child or young person.
- A person bereaved by a violent incident may feel angry and have thoughts of revenge. The person needs to be able to express these feelings. Listen non-judgementally and empathically.
- Court cases and media coverage of the crime can catch the bereaved unaware, reminding them of what happened.

Resources: <http://www.dyingmatters.org/page/dealing-sudden-or-violent-death>

Death by suicide

- Those bereaved by suicide are left with troubling questions. In addition to this they often face public scrutiny, in the community and perhaps in the media.
- People often want answers about why a suicide has occurred, and might speculate about what might have caused it. This can lead them to blame the death on a particular event, organisation, or person. Explain that it is very difficult to know what a person was thinking at the time of suicide, and that even if the person stated their reasons for suicide it is likely that there was a range of factors that contributed to their decision.
- The reasons why a person commits suicide are complex. Suicide is rarely due to a single event or problem. People who take their own lives are usually experiencing mental health problems, such as depression, at the time. Depression can cause people to feel that there is no hope and affect a person's ability to think clearly and rationally.
- Avoid talking about how the person died. Descriptions of a death can be overwhelming and distressing. Describing the means of death can increase the risk of imitation by other vulnerable young people.
- Reassure people that a range of responses are normal following a suicide. It is often the case that people feel angry with the person who has died or feel that they could have prevented the death in some way. These feelings can be confusing and distressing. Ensure people have the opportunity to talk about their feelings and what these mean. Explain that although someone taking their own life may cause us all to reflect no one is to blame for the death. Maintain the focus of discussion on how to manage the emotions brought up by the person's death.
- Talk about the importance of people seeking help if they are feeling overwhelmed by their emotions, unable to cope, or themselves having thoughts of suicide. Provide opportunities for people to talk about their emotions in school and provide information on support options such as: talking to their parents, talking to a trusted adult in school, a counsellor, GP, or telephone or online helplines.
- If you are concerned that a young person might be at risk of suicide, talk to them directly about your concerns in a calm and non-judgemental way. Ask the person directly about suicidal thoughts or plans, this gives the young person permission to speak openly about how they are feeling, and enables them to receive support. Asking these questions enables you to assess whether the young person is at risk from suicide, and if so what level that risk is at. If you believe a young person is at risk of suicide inform the Head Teacher and advise that professional support needs to be sought from local mental health services.

Resources:

Headspace is an Australian youth mental health foundation. The following information for schools on responding to a suicide is available on their website:

<https://www.headspace.org.au/schools/category/responding-to-a-suicide>

<https://www.headspace.org.au/schools/category/supporting-students>

<https://www.headspace.org.au/schools/category/supporting-staff>

<https://www.headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Corporate/Suicide-in-schools-Information-for-parents-web.pdf>

<https://www.headspace.org.au/assets/Uploads/Corporate/Tips-for-contacting-the-bereaved-family-following-a-suicide-web.pdf>

The Samaritans also provide support for schools on responding to a suicide and make the following information available:

https://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/HWWNIM_Feb17_Final_web.pdf

<https://www.samaritans.org/education/schools-professionals>

<https://www.samaritans.org/education/young-people>

<https://www.samaritans.org/education/parents-and-carers>

Following a suicide there is a risk of suicide attempts by others:

<http://www.wellscotland.info/priorities/preventing-suicide-and-self-harm>

Choose Life is the Scottish Government's strategy for Suicide prevention:

<http://www.chooselife.net/>

Grief after causing accidental death

Accidents happen. Sometimes these are due to a mistake, carelessness or recklessness other times they are purely accidents.

People who have been involved in an accident that has caused a death often feel guilty and ashamed. They might feel that they are a bad person. It can be very difficult for them to face the world and difficult to talk about what has happened, for fear that people are judging them. They can feel very isolated and these feelings could prevent them from seeking help.

People in this situation need to be reassured that although they may be coping with some really difficult emotions they will, over time, come to a better understanding and acceptance of what has happened. There is no reason for their life to be another life that is ruined by the accident.

They will need reassurance that people do make mistakes, and that what is important is that he or she learns from what has happened.

In the longer term there are steps that people who have caused a death in an accident can work through:

- Facing up to his or her own level of responsibility for the accident and considering whether changes need to be made to reduce the risk of future accidents. Necessary or advisable changes might include giving up alcohol or drugs, working on anger or impulse control, or giving up certain activities. Some people may need to accept that there was nothing they could have done differently to prevent the accident.
- Making use of what has been learnt from this terrible experience to make a difference in a positive way.

Resources

The following link is to a USA website that provides information and support for people who have caused death or injury in an accident:

<http://accidentalimpacts.org/>