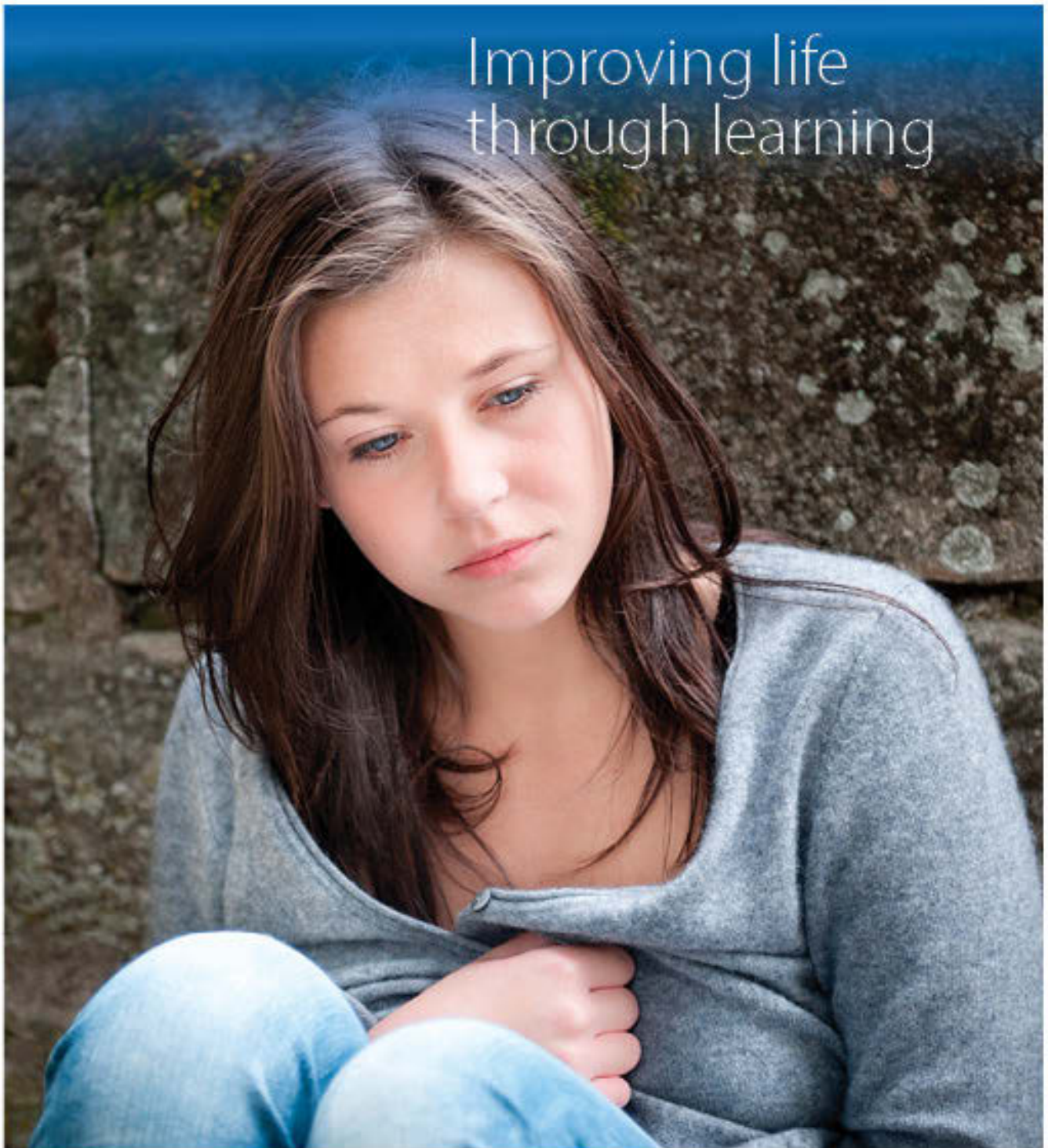


# Loss and Bereavement

Critical Incident Guidelines for Education Establishments

Improving life  
through learning





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# Introduction

## Responding to a Significant Death in the School Community

Stirling Council expects all schools to have considered how they will respond to a critical incident affecting the school community, as outlined in the guidance 'Critical Incident Response Plan' (2018) and associated 'Critical Incident Toolkit'. The framework below is designed to help school leaders think about what they need to do in the immediate and longer term following a death affecting their school community.

This guidance has been influenced by Winston's Wish 'A Strategy for Schools: Positive responses to Death' (2019) and will help schools to develop a plan specifically on loss and bereavement for their establishment.

In the event of exceptional circumstances, such as the closure of schools during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this guidance should be read in conjunction with information posted on Stirling Educational Psychology Service's Glow blog.

## Aim

- Provide clear and easy to follow advice regarding actions to be taken following a bereavement affecting the school community and what should be done in the immediate and longer term following a death.
- **The Bereavement Charter for Children and Adults in Scotland (2020) noted that Scotland should be a place where:**
  - Grief, bereavement and death is recognised as a natural part of life.
  - There is an open culture that is supportive of people having the opportunity to grieve.
  - Accessing support (including emotional, practical, financial, social and spiritual) is seen as a right.
  - Efforts are made to ensure that adequate bereavement support is accessible for everyone.
  - People have space and time to grieve.
  - It is recognised that bereavement might affect all aspects of a person's life (e.g. relationships, school, and workplace).

We know, however, that a distressing event, such as serious injury or death of a pupil, former pupil, staff member or parent/carer, can have a significant impact on a whole school community. The impact will depend on the role that the person had in school, how well known they were and the circumstances around the death e.g. whether it was a death following an illness, a sudden death following an accident or a death by suicide.

Experience tells us that children and staff members benefit from being given clear, factual information about what has happened. This avoids unhelpful rumours or misinformation being spread and ensures that we can all talk about death and help one another as part of the normal grief reaction.

# Informing Staff

Inform Schools, Learning and Education management/link officer, as soon as possible so that your establishment's support needs can be met. You may also wish to speak with your link Educational Psychologist to alert them and obtain advice.

Arrange a staff meeting as soon as possible and identify any staff members who are missing, e.g. off sick, as it is important that all staff are informed. This will help ensure that all staff feel part of a caring and supportive team. Prior to sharing information it is important to have checked out with the bereaved family what information they wish shared in order to respect their confidentiality.

Explain to staff what has happened as clearly and factually as you can – this can be an upsetting experience for the person doing the explaining, but remember it is normal for you to feel upset. Sometimes privately rehearsing what you might say can be helpful.

Some staff will be visibly upset and the information can trigger memories of previous experiences of loss or death. They might want or need to talk about their own previous experiences. This is quite usual. Encourage staff to think about their own needs for support at this time and going forward.

Provide staff with a 'script' about the death so that they can speak consistently with the children or young people, in an age appropriate way, about what has happened. Talk with them about possible questions that may arise and how they can be answered so that they do not feel that they have to think about answers 'on the spot'.

Consider whether to offer staff members the possibility of speaking with the school link Educational Psychologist if they have particular queries about how to speak with the children and young people or concerns in relation to supporting particularly upset children or young people.

Identify who is the best person to liaise with the family of the child or the staff member and consider what support they will need as they take on this role. They should also be able to liaise with the family over funeral representation and, as time goes by, a suitable memorial.

If there is likely to be media attention, seek support from the Communications team about how to handle any press queries.

Things might be happening very fast so if in doubt about what to do trust your gut instinct and seek support for yourself too.

Consider how to keep the lines of communication open with staff over the passage of time (and with senior managers) and consider what useful learning you are developing from this experience as part of self-evaluation (**Appendix 2**).

# Informing Children and Young People

Children and young people need to know what has happened and what is likely to happen next.

Identify which children/young people had important relationships with the deceased e.g. had known them a long time, were part of their friendship group or had been taught by the staff member. They might need to be given the opportunity to spend time together supported by a staff member for short periods of time over the next few days. Ensure that the staff members who are supporting this have time 'off duty' so that they do not become overwhelmed. The children/young people are liable to move in and out of feeling upset and some may prefer to remain in class. Others will seek support from the group and use the time to cry, laugh and remember the person who has died.

Inform children/young people of the death in the smallest groups possible and use factual language in giving explanations. Avoid the use of euphemisms, such as 'passed away' or 'lost'.

Consider the needs of children/young people who e.g. may have additional support needs, those who may have difficulties managing their emotions or those who have had previous experience of a bereavement.

Experience has shown that it is more beneficial for all the children/young people to be informed. Having thought through a 'script' for how you are going to tell the children/young people can be helpful, e.g.

*"I have some really sad news to tell you today which I know will be upsetting for some of you. Mr Brown, the science teacher, had been very ill with cancer for several months and sadly died this morning."*

*"I have some really sad news to tell you today. Sometimes people have accidents at home, at work or when in their car. This morning Jonathan Brown in primary 7 had an accident in his car when his dad was driving him to school. Jonathan was very badly hurt in the accident and was taken to hospital. The doctors tried hard to help him but he was too badly injured and sadly he died."*

Allow some time for the children/young people to talk about what you have said to them, to ask questions and to express their shock and upset at the information. Allow them time to talk about their own experiences of bereavement, be it a grandparent or a pet. They may return to the topic in class and should be allowed to talk about their feelings.

Be honest about your own feelings and talk openly about your own relationship with the person.

Be prepared for children/young people to have a range of different emotional responses – everyone responds differently to shock. Do not be surprised if some children/young people do not appear to be upset. This does not mean they do not care. It can be their way of coping with the news.

Try to maintain normal school routines whenever possible as this predictability can help children and young people feel safe and cope better.

Generally following a death, children and young people are best supported by family, friends and adults who know them well. Grief following a death is normal and we need to understand it as such.

Be mindful of any ongoing concerns about children or young people and consider whether they need additional support – it might be at that time that you consider a consultation with your link Educational Psychologist or consider whether the young person requires additional professional support.



Over time, consider in liaison with the bereaved family what might be an appropriate memorial, e.g. a bench in the school grounds or the planting of a tree. Further ideas and suggestions can be found in the useful links section of these guidelines.

## Informing Parents and Carers

It is important that parents/carers are informed of the death of a member of staff or a pupil so that they are able to support their child. A draft letter that can be adapted to your context is included in these guidelines (**Appendix 1**).

## Plan for a Child's Return to School

For children/young people who have suffered a bereavement and have been off school, thought needs to be given on how to support their return to school.

### **The following actions may be helpful:**

- Home visit by class teacher/member of staff to discuss arrangements for return e.g. visits, part time attendance etc.
- Planned support for emotional needs, e.g. how to cope with any comments and questions of other pupils, permission to remove themselves from lessons to go to an agreed place if they are becoming distressed, etc.
- Consideration of how friends can be a support, e.g. walk to school with them.
- Consider whether it would be helpful for work to be sent home prior to return.
- Brief staff and children on how best to support individuals returning to school.
- Arrangements to differentiate work, manage missed course work, special arrangements for exams.
- Adjust working arrangements for staff returning to school.



# Advice and Support from the Educational Psychology Service

It is a common reaction for people to think that counselling should be offered as an immediate response to a bereavement however, grief is a normal reaction and it is important to ensure that a child or young person has had time to process the grief in a supportive environment. The Educational Psychology Service's response is to work with the establishment to 'normalise' the reactions of individuals and to support the establishment's process of recovery.

## **Educational Psychologists will seek to support schools in the following ways:**

- Advice and consultation to senior managers and decision makers in terms of a response and supporting an establishment in planning their recovery from such an incident.
- A 'listening ear', which can be a visit or telephone contact.
- Psychological advice on areas such as loss, bereavement and trauma reactions to an incident, providing resources or information that establishments and staff might find useful in supporting children, young people and parents/carers. Up to date resources and helpful links can be found on [Stirling Educational Psychology Service's Glow blog](#).
- Initial advice and support to individuals affected by the critical incident, which might include signposting to other information, supports or other services for any medium to longer term input.
- Training for staff in the Seasons for Growth programme which is a group-based intervention for individuals who have experienced significant change or loss.

## Useful Links

The following are links to websites where further information, resources and activities can be found on loss and bereavement.

- [Stirling Educational Psychology Service Glow Blog](#) (includes information for children/young people, parent/carers and staff).
- [Winston's Wish](#)
- [Childhood Bereavement Network](#)
- [Bereavement UK](#)
- [CRUSE Bereavement Scotland](#)
- [Seasons for Growth](#)

Please ensure that you continue to refer to Stirling Council's Critical Incident documents on the [Source](#) for further guidance.



## Draft Letter Template to Parents/Carers

Dear parents/carers

Your child's class teacher had the sad task today of informing the children of the death of (name) who had been a teacher/pupil at this school for a number of years. Our thoughts are with (name's) family and friends at this time. We felt it was important to let all our children know about (name's) death and the children were told that (name) died as a result of (cause).

When someone dies, their friends and family have many feelings – sadness, anger and confusion, which are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer any questions they have but should you have any specific concerns about your child please get in touch.

Yours sincerely

# Staff Evaluation Template

<b>Date and time of meeting</b>
<b>Attendees</b> All staff should contribute to this process. Staff who do not attend the meeting should be given alternative opportunities to contribute to the evaluation process.
<b>Discussion of incident timeline</b> Communication, response, actions
<b>Identify any problems/issues and their causes</b> Communication, response, actions
<b>Identify what went well</b> Communication, response, actions
<b>Further actions to take</b> Identify actions, timescales for completion and responsible staff



## Review of Loss and Bereavement Critical Incident Guidelines for Education Establishments

	Date	Lead Officer(s)
<b>Produced</b>	May 2020	Morven Graham, Principal Educational Psychologist
<b>Review</b>	May 2023	Morven Graham, Principal Educational Psychologist

If you need help or this information  
supplied in an alternative format  
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