

Young People, Schools and Bereavement

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Foreword

My life and what I have been through

My name is Lauren, I am 12 years old. At the moment I live with my grandmother who is not very well, I am a young carer.

My other nanny sadly died on Friday 3rd February 2006. I'm very upset and feel like crying but I promised her I wouldn't. My gramp sadly died in 2004, I can't remember the exact day of which month it was a sad moment for everyone. But as people always say if your born you've got to die it's the most horrible thing in life but everyone goes through it. Everyone will miss nanny and grampy but all the people that we know and nan and gramp knew that has died they will be re-united in heaven and when we die we will see everyone again. Everyone that we all know that are in heaven are watching over us to keep us safe from danger and to protect us. So we will be safe for the rest of our lives until we meet them again in heaven to start our new lives with them. But until then we have to keep looking to the future and looking after the people who are still here with us today. My final word to you all who read this is to start thinking about the people who we have lost in our lives and remember the good times we have had with them and the mistakes you have done put them behind you and start the days all over again starting from the time you finish this letter. KEEP YOUR HEADS UP HIGH

By LAUREN

Acknowledgments

“Grief is like a jagged stone. The edges wear away but the stone remains.”

(Seasons of Grief - Compassionate Friends Publication)

Grateful thanks must go to the following people/organisations for their contributions and support during the making of this pack. We would especially like to thank the schools and individuals who have told their stories in the case studies, these include:

- Chipping Campden
- Whitecross
- Stroud High School for Girls
- Dursley
- Hesters Way
- Coney Hill
- Milestones

Belinda Heaven, Emotional and Physical Health Consultant, Healthy Schools Partnership

Jan Jepps, Public Health Manager Gloucestershire PCT

Heather Danson, Samaritans

Brendan McIntyre, Winstons Wish

Anne Knight-Elliott and Chris Harwood, Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service

Marie Walker, Primary Behaviour Support Team

Sue Smith, School Nursing Service

Lauren from Gloucestershire Young Carers

Young People, Schools and Bereavement

“There are lots of dates that are important to me most of them because they were special days with my dad. I especially like to remember him on his birthday and at New Year when we used to set off fireworks together.”

Anon

Introduction

This bereavement pack has been put together by a multi-agency group of professionals as a response to concerns from within schools for coping with children who have been bereaved.

When school staff and others are called upon to support a bereaved child it may raise issues for them. Individuals will often revisit their own grief and relive personal past experiences. Some of these memories may be very painful to them.

This pack provides a signpost to agencies and sources of support for individuals and for the whole school community. There are some examples of good practice – some ideas on how death may be discussed more openly and examples of letters that can be used to inform the community. It will inform revision of existing policies and is based upon extensive knowledge and experience of practitioners from Winston’s Wish, The Samaritans, Educational Psychology and Health Professionals as well as feedback from schools and other organisations working with children and young people.

Loss is a part of life and children have a right to receive the best support in coping with it. The grief for a child is particularly significant for several reasons:

- Its finality is beyond the understanding of younger children
- Children and young people are just beginning to explore and discover the world.
- Other significant adults in their lives are likely to be preoccupied with their own grief
- Adults often feel they can protect children from the grief by distraction, covering up and ignoring
- The time lost has repercussions in school. Children may not be learning and achieving and this may have a detrimental effect on their social and emotional development
- 54% of young offenders have experienced a significant bereavement in the 2 years before their offence (Excellence and Enjoyment 2003)
- Those who experience multiple bereavements or bereavement alongside other difficulties, are statistically “at risk” of experiencing negative outcomes (in areas such

as education, depression, self-esteem and risk taking behaviour in later life (Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop 2005)

It is estimated that 5% of children in the UK experience the death of a parent. Using the 2001 census data this works out as 5565 0-15 year olds in Gloucestershire who have been bereaved of a parent or sibling.

This pack should provide a structure for schools and agencies that work with children to be supportive both for the staff and children within the organisation when bereavements occur. It provides several factors to be considered including:

- Psychological Factors such as the relationship between the child and the deceased, the characteristics of the child and the death.
- Social Factors
- Physiological Factors

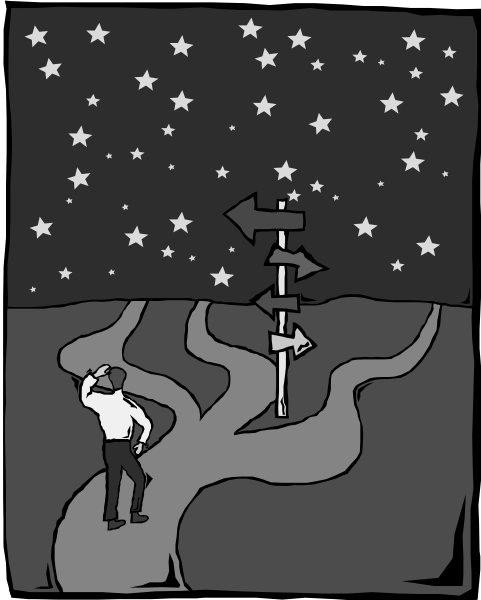
There will also be facts and figures, advice and contacts for further information and support.

It should be highlighted at this point that each death is different, the environment and circumstances for the individual will vary as will the individual response. How the organisation responds when a death has occurred will need to take account of that variation.

What is Grief?

“Miss B showed us this website, she wrote down some things about her Nan, and she started to cry when she told us that her boyfriend never met her Nan and her Nan would love him”

David aged 12



Grief can occur with any loss not just a bereavement and is very personal i.e. what an individual feels is a loss is a loss, for example young teenagers experiencing first love may be devastated when it comes to an end, or a child bereft at the death of a pet.

Grief is the powerful reaction to loss, frequently likened to a journey or a spiral. Feelings may return and grieving is long-term work that should be measured in years not days, weeks or months. It is important to remember that grief is a normal and natural response to change, loss and death for children as well as adults. Each person has the ability to discover his or her own unique path through the grief process.

With grief and loss comes change which if resolved can ultimately be positive and enriching.

The young person, over time, may demonstrate an increased ability to:

- Relate to a situation
- Listen and respect difference
- Separate and part without loss of identity
- Be a better companion to others
- Manage change
- Fail without being threatened by it
- Value life
- Trust and be positive
- Show interest in new activities
- Have renewed energy
- Demonstrate a wider understanding of their own life and the world
- Show enhanced personal development and self esteem, (this may emerge over time, not necessarily straight away)



Some of the factors affecting feelings and reactions

The circumstances of the bereavement

- Opportunities to express grief
- Info about what happened
- How the death occurred
- How the news was given
- Whether the media are involved
- Has the child seen the death?

The individual



The environment

- Home and care setting
- Faith and culture
- Perspectives
- Continued support from family/community
- Permission/space to express grief

Relationship to and with the deceased

Age/cognitive ability, language and social skills

Personality

Permission to express grief

Past experiences of loss/change/grief

Level of self-esteem

Every bereavement is different

Whitecross School experienced two very different bereavements quite close together. A very popular year nine pupil who had attended the school for several years died suddenly of a brain tumour. Within a year the school suffered another shocking bereavement when a year seven pupil who had only been at the school for two weeks was killed in a road collision.

The two families affected by these deaths responded very differently. For the year nine pupil the whole school became involved in the funeral, whilst the year seven pupil's family chose to mourn with close family and friends.

The key messages learned by the school were that you take your cue from the child and their family. They also realised the importance of having accurate tutor group lists with contact details as well as staff details. This is especially true during weekends and holidays as it makes informing people so much easier.

What might young people be feeling and thinking?

Age related concepts

Sam came up to his mummy who was crying at the kitchen sink.

“Why are you crying mummy?”

“It is because I am thinking about Daddy.” Said Mum

“Oh, that’s OK then” said Sam.

Sam aged 7 when his father died



It may help to know that when something bad happens children/young people often:

- Avoid feelings
- Push their feelings away
- Hide their feelings
- Disguise their feelings
- Deny their feelings
- Cover their feelings

There can be a stereotypical view of how the different genders react to grief; i.e. boys get angry and girls internalise their feelings. However, boys may internalise their feelings and girls could get angry rather than the other way around. Whilst this pack contains generalised statements that may be helpful, it cannot be stressed enough that reactions are individual.

These examples are for the chronological age of the child. Consideration should also be given to children with special educational needs. Their ability to understand and communicate their feelings varies enormously and suitable language should always be used to avoid misunderstandings.

Children under 2

Very young children and babies are not able to understand death. If a death occurs in the life of a child of this age they will experience the loss as separation from some one they have an attachment to. The child may notice the effect on the family but their expression of the experience may be later in life.

Children aged 2-5

This age group possess what is described as magical thinking and believe that death is reversible. They can be convinced that it is something they did or said that has caused the person to die so conversely by behaving or saying other things they will be able to bring the dead person back to life.

Explanations need to be concrete, children need facts in a literal way not euphemisms e.g. not that someone has gone away or gone to sleep but that they have died.

Young children may revert to earlier forms of behaviour such as bed-wetting sucking their thumb or using of a security blanket; they may have tantrums or dreams and nightmares.

This age group may need constant reassurance that the death was not their fault and repeat of explanations as they can tend to ask the same questions many times in order to help gain an understanding of what has happened.

Being read books about death, drawing and play gives opportunities to identify and talk about worries and help deal with bereavement. It should be noted that any of these activities could help any aged child. Again remember that they may not react as we expect.

Children aged 6-9

At this age the child will generally begin to understand the finality of death and how it applies to all living things but may still be confused about it. Children may be more open to discussion but may have what adults feel is an unhealthy curiosity about dead bodies. This can become a total pre-occupation and a black humour develops. For that individual this may be a completely natural reaction. Their curiosity is normal and they will benefit from clear explanations.

Dreams and nightmares again are common at this age and they may feel frightened of the spirits they link to death.

Like the younger child they may revert to previous patterns of behaviour and will require reassurance and secure routines that may make change difficult to negotiate.

Children are more likely at this age to complain of somatic symptoms such as headaches and tummy aches or just generally not feeling well. This may be in an attempt to not go to school but stay where it is safe. This relates to the child's perception and of course is one of the outcomes for children; we need to ensure that school feels a safe place to be.

Children aged 9-13

In this age range children understand death as irreversible and have an awareness of how the death impacts upon them both now and in the future. There may be expectations either from themselves or others that they need to be 'grown-up' or to be supportive of others, which along with the awareness of other people's feelings may make it difficult for them to express their own feelings. Their feeling that 'normal' friends will not want to hear their worries and grief also creates this. As they are at a stage of moving away from dependence and forming important relationships outside the family bereavement at this point can destabilise them. They may experience mood swings and big emotional releases such as anger and distress, which can be scary both for the individual and their carers.

Adolescents

At this time in their life young people are developing their ideas of who they are and peers and friends are increasingly important. Their bodies are changing and new possibilities are made available. Risk taking behaviour is more likely at this time as they test the boundaries. The death of someone close may make the young person reflect on the meaning of life and s/he may question why planning for the future has any importance.

Being busy on different activities and not stopping to reflect can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they fear losing control.

If over a prolonged period of time a teenager withdraws, acts in a matter of fact, detached or angry way, there may all be reasons to be concerned. They will need to be reassured that they have love and support and although the limits that are usually set still apply, someone is available to listen if needed.

“ They show you the way forward”

(member of staff from Coney Hill School)

It is important to respect personal responses. For example some members of staff were frightened to discuss the issues of death with the children, either because the pain was too intense or they were afraid of saying the wrong thing. Therefore colleagues had to support one another in coping with their own grief and supporting the children.

The children were very involved in designing a memorial garden. This provided an agreed goal for all to focus on, giving a sense of purpose and uniting the children and staff.

Denial of feelings

“Just for a second, Colin’s guts went cold, like when he remembered he hadn’t done his homework, only worse.

Then he did what he usually did with his homework....He stopped thinking about it

(Two Weeks With The Queen. M. Gleitzman)

Life is difficult and young people face many pressures. With the growing media coverage of social and political issues, they now find themselves aware of the difficulties facing the adults they share their lives with. They also become conscious of the wider worries and fears of society.

Adults who work with children and young people may find that they are the only consistent factor in a young person’s life, or the only person able to raise difficult issues with them. Young people can often hide their feelings so well that those who are close to them may be unaware of their difficulties and do not know how to reach them.

Feeling safe

Chipping Camden School stated that books of condolence were considered to be crucial. Special books were purchased, or to be more precise were donated by local shops once they knew what they were required for. The writing was helpful for both friends and mourners alike.

Showing feelings again was actively encouraged and therefore pupils did not bottle things up. Pupils were given consideration with homework deadlines and the ethos of the school is such that it is acceptable to hug each other and cry openly. Therefore feelings do not become suppressed and cause further damage.

Preparation for the return to school of young people who have been bereaved

"I light my candle on important days when I want to think about Dad"

Bethany age 8



Whatever support is given must comply with the families' wishes. Examples of best practice are highlighted later in the pack.

What should I expect?

Often a child or young person may be absent for a few days, the thought of taking part in normal activities ever again can seem impossible for them to comprehend. Or, it may be the very thing they want in order to experience normality again. A simple phone call, visit or letter to the home letting the family know you care can be a great way of finding out what the reaction of the child or young person is.

How can I make things easier for their return?

Ask the young person and family what, if anything, they would like explained to their friends, peers and school staff. If they wish others to know, they may want you to do the talking or to do it together. They may of course, not want the information to be passed on at all. If this occurs, it may be worth explaining that others will find out or may already know what has happened. However, they may not have all the facts and be confused or worried and not know what to say. This can lead to some children saying or doing inappropriate things. A simple explanation of the event can allay fears and provide information on appropriate responses.

If permission has been given to tell friends and peers then they could write some letters and cards saying that they are missed and being thought about. They might also find it helpful to be given simple phrases to use. They may need help to talk about the death; many people say nothing for fear of causing upset.

It might also be helpful to send information to the bereaved child or young person about what is happening in their absence may help, keeping them involved and up-to-date.

On return, some children may want to get straight back into things or they may want their first day back to be a bit different giving them time to chat with their friends or an adult.

On return it is important to acknowledge their loss and to recognise how different things are for them now. Phrases such as, “I was sorry to hear about.....” will give them permission to talk about it.

Will the child or young person’s behaviour have changed?

Maybe.

They may:

- Have less concentration or appear uncaring about things, appear absentminded and disorganised and no longer able to complete tasks they once accomplished with ease. They may also destroy work they have achieved or be apathetic about things
- Be a lot more tired therefore leading to irritability this could be due to sleeplessness. The tiredness can lead to some of the above
- Be more sensitive to comments and remarks. This is compounded by a reduced ability to trust and loss of faith or a social withdrawal
- Be so wrapped up in themselves they appear insensitive to others. They may show disruptive behaviour along with anger and hostility. They may even reject offers of support which can lead to more difficulties in relationships
- Have a lot of un-vented anger and frustration that may either be directed at themselves or others
- They may be withdrawn and not participating

These reactions, although normal, should not be ignored and strategies to help should be put in place. For example if concentration is difficult, provide a related but practical task. More ideas are given in the next section. If, however, the above reactions fail to reduce or become more noticeable, then more specialist help and support should be sought from specialist agencies.

Whilst some of these reactions are common it is important to maintain normal rules and expectations. Routine helps by providing structure in an unsure time but there may also need to be some flexibility, especially homework/coursework and other deadlines. Lack of routine can create more problems both for the child themselves and with peers.

School Nursing support

Following some months of illness and hospitalisation, Thomas’ Grandpa died. On returning to school after the funeral being upset, Thomas was directed to the school nurse “drop in”. He completed a workbook called ‘Muddles and Puddles’ with one of the bereavement support team within the school nursing service. The support allowed Thomas time out to grieve without him feeling that his relationship with his friends would be compromised.

Providing support - talking

“I think about my little brother all the time sometimes when I am not really expecting to, like when I am in the middle of watching a film.”

John aged 16

Imagine reading at your desk now, having just had your heart broken. Could you concentrate? Could you absorb knowledge when all you can think about is what is happening at home? Could you take in information about the outside world when all you can think of is the turmoil in your inner world? What are you to do with these feelings? You have not been taught how to manage these confusions. Tears well up. Everybody crowds round you at break, but all you want to do is cry. You cannot do that as it is embarrassing and you may never stop. By next week, they will forget to ask and how can anyone understand anyway? You keep lots inside at home for fear of upsetting anyone: there have been enough tears. You just want to watch television in peace. Most of the stuff in your head is too difficult to explain. Things do get easier, but months afterwards little things can still upset you. Everyone else's life is the same but yours has changed forever. It is not fair: you have done nothing wrong yet the rest of the world is filled with families. You have become closer to your family and there is a certain sense of having weathered the storm. You wish it had never happened, but you will always have a story to tell and a feeling of resilience.

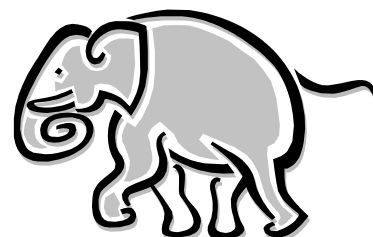
Thinking about talking

Most bereaved children will at some point be very glad to have the chance to talk about what has happened.

However, what usually happens is that we try to “get on with it” without troubling others. The one conversation that everyone wants to have no one is able to introduce: *the elephant in the room*.

When someone finally sums up the courage it is often too difficult to continue. It is therefore important when acknowledging a child's bereavement that you also offer the opportunity to talk if they wish to.

It is worth remembering that if you are worried you might say the wrong thing for the child or young person who has been bereaved. The worst thing that could happen already has!



Before talking

- **Think about time and place.** When the child or young person initially returns to school they may wish to talk immediately. It is therefore advisable to ensure that this is possible. If you are unable to talk immediately ensure that you make a time with the child when you can talk. Having said this it is not always easy to talk about difficult things at a set time – you need to talk when you need to talk. Staff therefore need to keep an eye on the young person, especially in the early days, and withdraw them from class as and when necessary. Always try to find a place to talk that is private and comfortable. Sometimes carrying out a practical activity can make the situation easier for both parties.
- **Recognise** that every death, and every reaction to it is unique. The way in which a child reacts to death is dependent on their relationship with the person who has died, the time of death in the child's development, the nature of the death, the child's understanding of death, their support network and many other factors.
- **Don't assume anything.** Do not project feelings you might expect a child or young person to have.
- **Other children** in the group may be affected by a death of someone close to them.
- **Moving in and out** - Expect children (especially younger ones) to move on fairly quickly. Children may be distraught one moment and the next, need to ask what is for lunch or express annoyance that it is raining outside.

When talking

The following are some simple tips for speaking with young people about death:

- On return it is important to acknowledge their loss and to recognise how different things are for them now. Phrases such as, "I was sorry to hear about....." will give them permission to talk about it.
- **Be Honest.** Firstly this means being honest with yourself about your own feelings. Death is not an easy subject for anyone. If you are upset too do not be afraid to admit it. Model the fact that it is okay and totally normal.

- **Use Clear Language.** Particularly with younger children who will be confused by euphemisms such as 'your loss' and 'gone to a better place'
- **Expect questions,** but don't feel pressured to provide immediate answers. Some may be simple or more complex. If there are questions that you are unable to answer say so, and promise to look into providing an answer at a later point.
- **Allow time** and space for children to digest the news, find out the facts and discover exactly how they feel. For most this may be their first experience of someone they know dying.
- **Try to normalise** the feelings a bereaved young person shares with you. They are probably worried they are the only person who has ever felt that way. More explanation may be required.
- **Acknowledge** some days will be better than others. A bereaved child may arrive late one day but seem absolutely fine and the next be totally different. Maintaining routines that are flexible will give them a sense of security.
- **A balanced approach** may be required if for example the death was caused through alcoholism, if the child gave their parent a drink they may feel a huge sense of guilt and need not to be judged.

Someone to listen

Edwina, a teacher from Dursley Primary School whose husband died suddenly found the many sympathy cards and supply of meals very helpful. Whilst she initially struggled over when to return to work, she was clear about reducing her hours and level of responsibility to enable her to make more time for both her sons and herself.

Her particular difficulties were due to people not talking about Steve or using his name and also returning to an empty house at night. She still needs and wants to talk about him but is unsure as to whether it is ok to talk openly about Steve in school as time moves on.

The support from the school staff has been phenomenal, so much so that outside agencies have not been required. The head teacher stated that it was easier to support Edwina because of her honesty; she was very clear about what she needed.

Providing support - other suggestions

“Since mum died, I don’t always have to eat food that is good for me. That’s good, but there is no-one to brush my hair.”

Georgia aged 9

Strategies for supporting the reactions of the young person who has been bereaved

Whilst it is important to maintain routines it is also helpful to adopt a degree of flexibility. As has been highlighted before, people who have been bereaved often experience difficulties with one or more of the following:

- Concentration because of pre-occupation with the bereavement
- Organisation
- Tiredness
- Irritability
- Over sensitivity
- Withdrawal
- Anger, frustration and hostility to self and others

Provide support by ensuring that the child understands that any of these reactions are quite normal in the circumstances and they usually do gradually get better.

Involve the child in finding strategies to help. This is particularly important as s/he may well feel that the recent events have left them with little control.

The following could also be considered:

- **Concentration** - provide alternative activities such as related practical tasks: running errands, tidying books etc: drawing or painting can be particularly helpful, allowing an expression of feelings without having to talk about them: subject tasks which are well within the child’s capability and require little thought. Whilst accepting the need to think about events that have occurred and providing another activity also gently encourage a return to having a go at the same thing as the other pupil, perhaps with a paired peer support.

- **Organisation** - it is likely that following bereavement the family and the child may well find it more difficult to be organised with items such as having the correct equipment etc. Forgetting to bring the right things to school should be understood and catered for a short while following the bereavement. Check to see if the child would like to have a list of things to remind them.

- **Tiredness** - as with concentration above, it may be necessary to provide alternative practical or easy tasks or allow a time in the book corner or library.

- **Irritability** - over sensitivity and anger, frustration and hostility to self and others – It is important that both young person concerned and the other pupils are made aware that the feelings are brought about by the stress of the situation that has been experienced. Strategies to cope with these reactions should be discussed and developed with all those involved. For example the young person concerned should be helped to recognise when things are becoming too stressful and how they can say or do something to prevent an outburst. Peers should also be helped to be more tolerant and understanding of the situation.

- **Withdrawal** - Adults should check with the child what they could do to help.

Thinking about the reactions of other pupils

- Act early to prevent rumours from spreading. It is a good idea to check with the family what information they would like shared, again respect for different cultures is essential.

- Humour, Our response to death is often masked when in public. Some people mask it with humour, which can be hurtful, as can rumours about a death or an individual. Remember nasty words are sometimes born out of fear.

- Other children in the group may be affected by a death of someone close to them.

Support from Educational Psychologists

A pupil of Stroud High School was killed in a road traffic collision the day before receiving GCSE results. The local authority provided support to the school through the education psychology service. They advised having two rooms available on the day results were given out. In one room the pupils were given their results and could be loud and celebrate. The second room was decorated with photographs, candles, a book of remembrance and space for quiet reflection. Both the staff and pupils found this space very helpful.

At the start of the new term the head teacher used a regular assembly format about pupils being like pieces of a jigsaw, each providing a part of the whole picture of the school. The death of the girl was symbolised by the missing piece of the jigsaw.

The school have developed a policy, which fits onto one side of A4 paper stating what to do when a death occurs.

A Death in a community of young people

“My Grandad had died earlier in the year but this was different. I didn’t see him very often whereas Rosie was an empty seat beside me in class. If someone laughed, it seemed wrong – how could people be enjoying themselves when Rosie was gone?”

Emma Aged 13



A death within a group or community can have a huge affect on the group as a whole. Speaking with a single child about the death of a parent or sibling needs to be discreet and sensitive to their individual needs, dealing with a death that affects many people is quite a different issue.

- Breaking the news of a death should not occur in a large group. However, there are occasions when staff may clarify details in a gathering such as an assembly. This is not generally an advisable way of talking about someone’s death but in certain situations cannot be avoided for example where rumours are circulating. Children react better when they all know all the information, which will make it less easy to pass on and create rumours. Children value honesty and reliable information and are usually the best judge of what and how much information they require.
- The person breaking the news should be someone known and trusted by the children and young people, someone not afraid to share how they feel themselves about the death. Information about what will be happening in the future is helpful for example memorial events or closing of the school/group. Language used should be appropriate to the age of the listeners using correct terminology that avoids euphemisms.
- Although organisational policies do not cover every eventuality, the process of preparation will help to give confidence when the event occurs, particularly if it was unforeseen. eg (‘Managing Crises in Schools’ may help)

On-going care and record keeping

*“My mum died and my life changed forever, it was the biggest thing that ever happened to me.
My teacher never mentioned it”*

Christopher aged 17

How long will it take to get are over it?

Nobody gets over it. His or her life has changed forever. However those who have been bereaved may not feel as emotional as they do in the first few days and weeks, life will return to a less shocked state, but it will be different forever. Each person's grief is different. Some seem to be in a period of denial and don't seem to have problems for a long time and then it suddenly hits. There are phases of grief and everyone will work through them at their own pace.

Major changes, anniversaries, stress of exams or new loss can also cause a resurgence of grief for example a new loss or moving schools.

Records should be kept and passed on at times of transition such as change of teacher, class or school. Communication is key to being able to provide continuing mentoring and support.

Other points for consideration

All young people who have been bereaved will find ways of coping. Some adopt coping strategies that could be damaging. These include deliberate self-harm, substance misuses and offending behaviour including bullying. Professionals who work with young people may be aware of this and should consider whether the young person requires further support.

The section on signposting offers other avenues for dealing with specific issues.

Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

Completed by Child Action Team

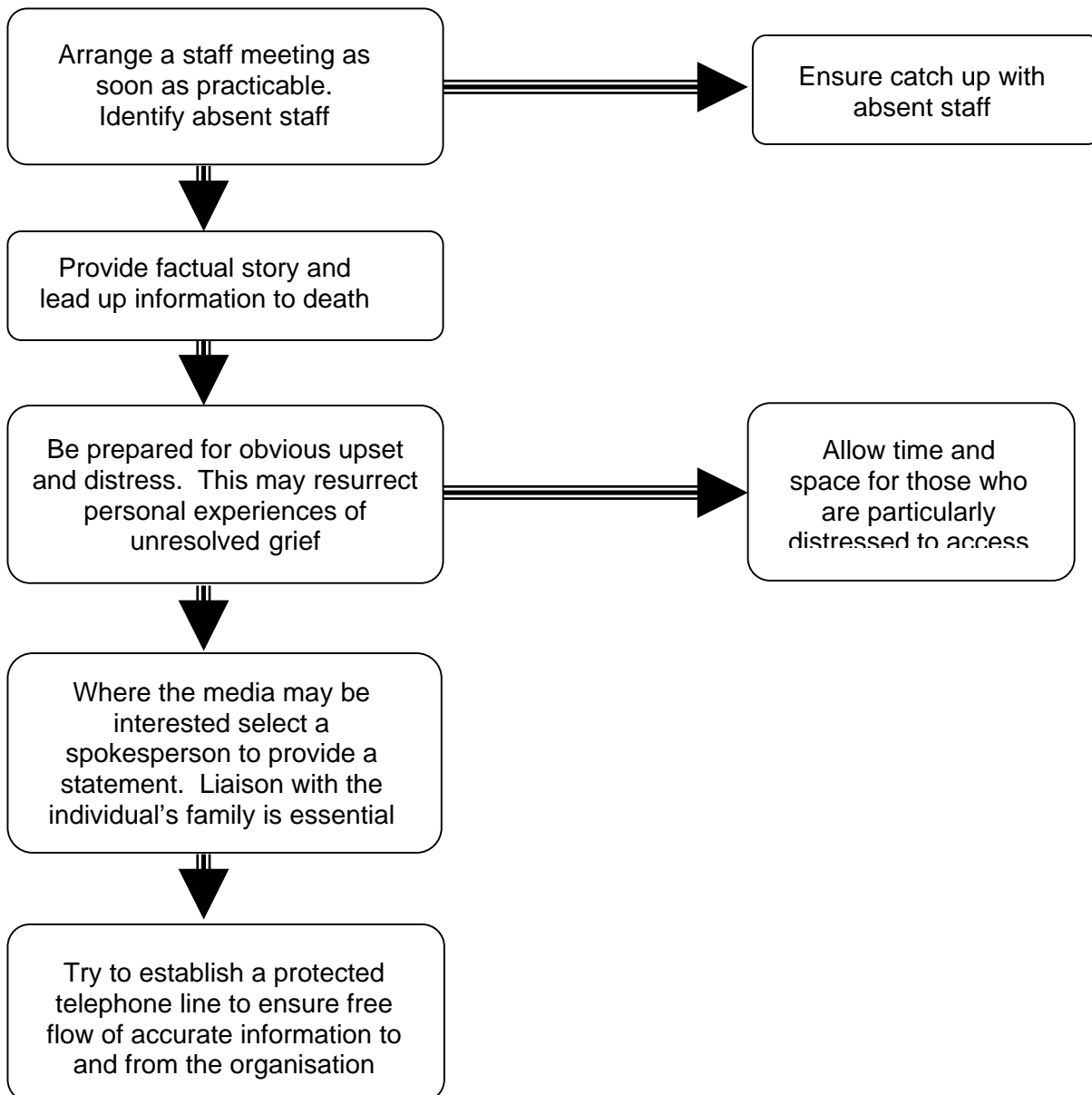
Julie's mum is ill with cancer, which is terminal. She has a range of friends, some of her own age and some that are older. She is an only child who lives with her mum. She does not think she has a problem with anger, however, her mum says she does often get really angry and can walk out of the house and not return until the next day.

Julie often worries about what is going to happen to her when her mum dies, she sometimes gets drunk to cope with this. She has had thoughts of hurting herself but has not done so far.

By using the CAF the assessor has been able to identify the risks for Julie and therefore begin to address her needs.

Informing staff

“Death neither obeys the school timetable nor appears on it...it enters the classroom without knocking”



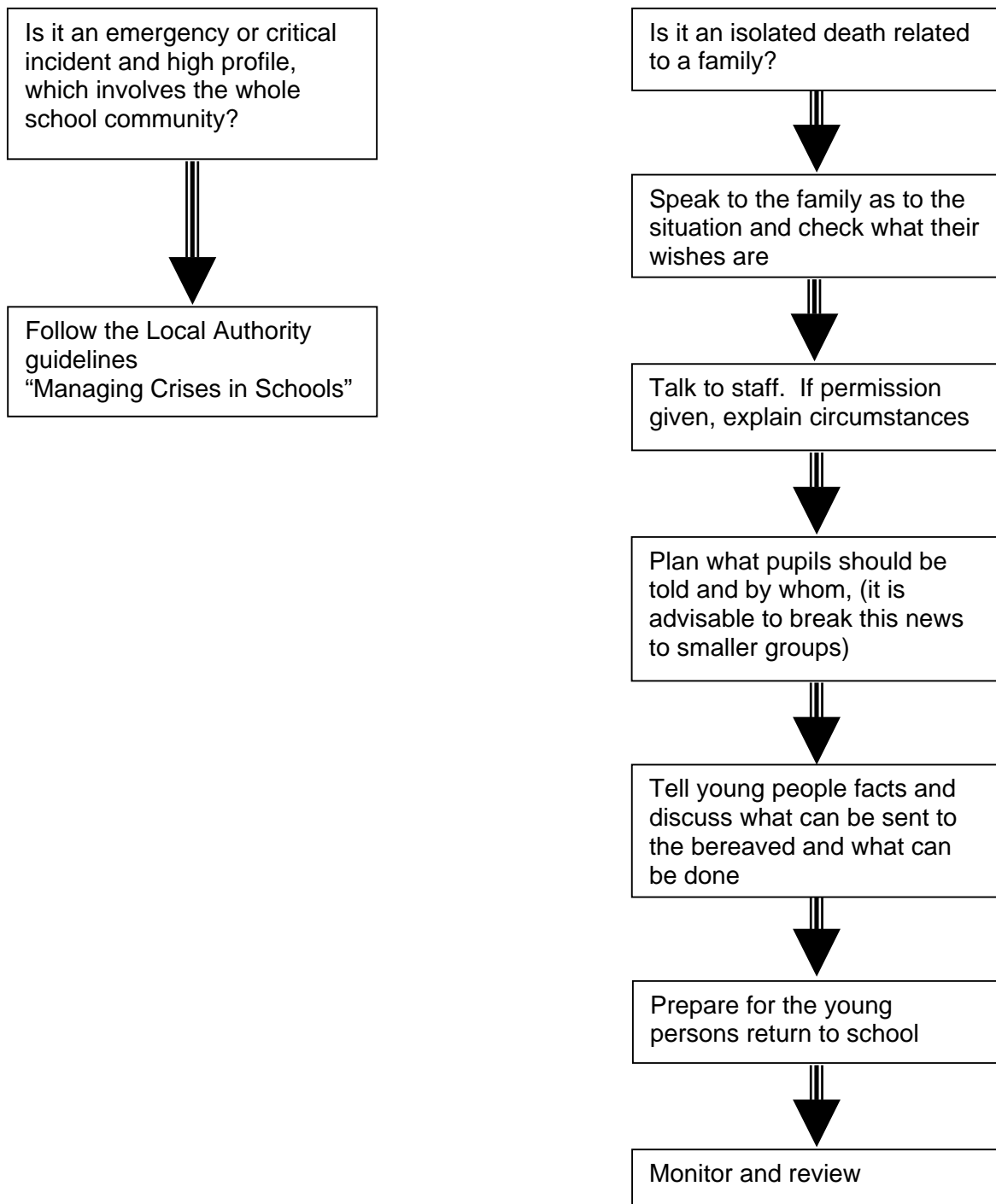
During collection of information from the schools for case studies, several schools reiterated the importance of support for staff, thereby enabling them in turn to support the pupils.

What schools can do in the event of a bereavement

"My teacher is really understanding, one year on she still listens and looks out for me"

Gill aged 9

School receives news of the death



To assess on-going needs it is advisable to use the common assessment framework.

Advice for parents and carers

“As a bereaved parent I only want to do what is best for my children and myself. But it is very difficult to cope with my own loss as well as the great loss the children have had.”

Bereaved mother



When someone important dies, whether it is a partner or child, it is usually a distressing event, particularly when the person who dies is relatively young. People react differently when they experience a death. Some may be shocked; some may seem not to react, whilst others become very upset.

People tend to experience a range of intense emotions. Coping with such feelings can be especially hard when you are trying to support your child or children. You may feel shocked, sad, angry, guilty, anxious, relieved, lonely, irritable and many other feelings. Indeed, all these feelings may be jumbled up together. Adults may feel disappointed that they will never be able to do the things they had planned to do together, finding everyday situations and tasks difficult. Relating to other people can become a great strain. Such reactions and feelings are normal after a death.

If a bereaved child displays behaviour needs to be challenged and punished it is right that it is done. It is important the statements such as, “what would your dad say?” should be avoided as this piles an enormous amount of guilt and pressure upon the young person. People often get the help they need from their family and friends, but it can help to talk to someone more neutral, or others in a similar situation. If you feel you need some support, it might help to discuss this with your family doctor who will be able to advise you about local services. Alternatively, you may prefer to contact some of the organisations listed at the end of this pack.

Parents often feel the needs of the children come first. However, you also need to make time for yourself to experience your own feelings of grief. By looking after yourself, you will be better placed to help your children and other family members.

Children often look to their parents to see how they are expected to react when someone has died. It is therefore all right to cry in front of children, and with them, explaining why you are

feeling sad or angry. Saying things out loud often helps children to understand and be more aware of what is happening.

Everyone needs to let off steam sometimes – there is no such thing as a perfect parent. It is more helpful to show your feelings than to try to pretend that everything is all right in front of your children. They may then think they should not talk about the person who has died or show their feelings. This can make their grieving more complicated. After a death, different family members often protect each other. Even young children look after their parents.

Communication is the key

Following the sudden and unexpected death of a pupil at Whitecross School, the head teacher had to deal with many telephone calls. Many were with regard to rumours of how the pupil had died. The head had great difficulty accessing accurate information. The crisis management team from the county council were able to contact the hospital on the school's behalf and the school was then able to reassure parents that other pupils were not at risk of a communicable disease.

When another pupil died in a road collision the head found it was useful to talk to the paramedics who attended the scene. They were able to dispel any horror stories. The police were most helpful with both bereavements providing valuable support and information.

Bereavement by suicide and other sudden trauma

“The policeman said she died as soon as the accident happened. The ambulance came but her heart had stopped forever”

Jemma aged 7

Explaining to a child that someone has died through suicide is possibly one of the most difficult situations that a parent or carer might ever face. All too often a family suicide leaves behind difficult memories and feelings.

Accidents, such as traffic collisions can be hard to believe because they happen so suddenly. One minute the person is alive and the next they have died.

When someone dies suddenly and in traumatic circumstances, family members sometimes show signs of traumatic stress. This might include having unwanted pictures or images of the trauma (flashbacks) coming into their mind, or upsetting dreams and difficulty in sleeping. There can be physical symptoms such as dizziness and fast heart beating. All this is normal and should lessen in intensity over time.

The death of someone you have been close to, whatever the circumstances can bring intense feelings of grief. However, some of the responses and emotions experienced by people who are bereaved by suicide may differ. The fact that a person's death appeared to involve an element of choice raises painful questions. The bereavement may be prolonged; shock, guilt and isolation can be greater. The grieving process is characterised by questioning and a search for an explanation. It is common to feel abandonment and rejection leading to feelings of inadequacy and fear of further rejection. Other aspects of unexpected deaths and death by suicide that can add to the difficulties are the police investigations and coroners inquest and any associated media interest and publicity. It is also important to remember that the media may revisit anniversaries of deaths by accident or suicide. This could result in more distress for children, families and friends. Likewise, if the original death had high profile media coverage, any subsequent cases with similar circumstances could result in further media coverage of the original case, which again could cause additional distress for family and friends.

Research indicates that the first three weeks following a suicide is a time of great vulnerability for both staff and pupils. Those close to a deceased pupil need careful monitoring for at least

three months afterwards and also at specific times such as an inquest, the deceased birthday and anniversary of the death.

Staff may have to cope with issues relevant to the death in lessons and schools have found it helpful to use their pastoral programme or tutorial periods to deal with these. It is unwise for such programmes to focus on the deceased pupil, yet issues arising from the death should not be avoided.

What is clear is that the ethos and organisation of the school is as important as any professional intervention: the attitudes of the staff and the way that the school as a whole responds to the incident are critical in determining the pupil's responses'. (Suicide Prevention: The Challenge Confronted: The Health of the Nation 1994)

Within a community such as a school or youth group it will be important to consider whether there were any witness to the accident. If there were then these young people may be in need of additional support.

Media management

Chipping Campden School had an extraordinarily challenging time with regard to bereavement. Twenty-five pupils were involved in a road collision whilst on a school trip. A year eleven pupil committed suicide, another one was drowned and two sixth formers were killed outright in a road traffic collision with the third being admitted to intensive care.

The head teacher co-ordinated support from local faith agencies, educational psychology service, specialist youth workers and Winston's Wish to ensure ALL felt supported. Things that proved very helpful included:

- A room for quiet reflection.
- Good communication with the families
- Memorials
- Donations to Charities
- Memory Boxes
- Books of Condolence

The head felt communication was the key and the Gloucestershire County Council provided a media team to manage the media interest, which removed pressure from the school.

Useful reading and support materials

KS1/ FK2	AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	YEAR	ISBN PRICE
1	CLARK, Emma Chichester	Up In Heaven Daisy the dog becomes old and unwell, dies and goes to heaven. She loves it in heaven and wathes her family on earth as they grieve for her. <i>For talking about heaven and about dreams and memories.</i>	Andersen Press	2003	1842703331 £5.99
1	DURANT, Alan	Always and Forever When Fox dies, Otter, Mole and Hare remember the things he used to do. In their hearts and memories and laughter, he will always be there. <i>Use to talk about good memories.</i>	Picture Corgi	2004	0552548774 £5.99
1	FOREMAN, Michael	Evie and the Man that Helped God George used to show Evie how to help God grow their garden. One day, George goes off to help God all of the time. <i>Life is cyclical.</i>	Andersen Press	2002	184270219X £10.99
1	ROSEN, Michael	Lovely Old Roly Roly the cat dies and it's too soon to think about a replacement – but when the time comes a new cat turns up. <i>Understanding that a new pet does not take the place of one that has died.</i>	Frances Lincoln	2002	0711214891 £5.99
1	VARLEY, Susan	Badger's Parting Gifts The well-loved story of a dependable, reliable and helpful badger who realises that his old age will soon lead to death. His friends learn to come to terms with his death in an enchanting tale.	Picture Lions	1994	0006643175 £5.99
1	THOMAS, Pat	I Miss You: A First Look At Death A look at what happens and the feelings associated with the loss of a loved one. <i>Use at times of specific need.</i>	Hodder Wayland	2000	0764117645 £4.99
1-2	BINCH, Caroline	The Princess and the Castle Genevieve has to get to know her Mum's new boyfriend, following the death of her Dad.	Jonathan Cape	2004	0224064614 £10.99
1-2	HARRIS, Robie H	Goodbye Mousie When a young boy's mouse dies he has to deal with feelings of sadness and anger. <i>Use to discuss life cycles and coping with death.</i>	Simon & Schuster	2003	074362130 £4.99

1-2	WOOD, Douglas	<p>Grandad's Prayers of the Earth The boy used to go for walks with his Grandad and one day they talked about prayers and how trees and leaves, birds and people pray in different ways and why. The boy often listened for the prayers of the earth after that but was not sure he heard them. Then one day, after Grandad died, he prayed for Grandad to come back and it did not work. Eventually he began to hear prayers for himself.... <i>A very touching and gentle book, beautifully illustrated, for the Christian family where doubt has set in.</i></p>	Walker Books	1999	0744536481 £10.99
2	EDWARDS, Nicola	<p>Saying goodbye to a ... Parent ... Pet ... Grandparent ... Brother or Sister ... Friend A series of books for age 6-9 year olds, about how to understand and cope when someone you love dies. Each book is slightly different but typically cover illness and death, associated feelings, saying goodbye, remembering, difficult days and feeling happy again. <i>An uncomplicated look at death and the stages of grief.</i></p>	Chrysalis	2003	1844584682 1844584690 1844584674 1844584658 1844584666 £5.99
2	THOMPSON, Colin	<p>Falling Angels Sally experiences new worlds through her dreams. She brings joy to her dying grandmother's life by encouraging her to travel in her dreams. <i>Useful for discussing life after death</i></p>	Red Fox	2002	0099432986 £5.99
2	WILSON, Jacqueline	<p>Cat Mummy Verity's old tabby cat dies and she decides to mummify it so they can be together forever. All this is tied up with the fact that the cat used to belong to her mother, who died a long time ago..... <i>A book to help those who have lost a family member a long time ago, which will be enjoyed by other children while they learn a bit about how it must feel.</i></p>	Corgi	2002	044086416X £4.99
2	WILSON, Jacqueline	<p>Vicky Angel Vicki and Jade are inseparable friends. Vicky dies in a car accident while they are quarrelling. However, Vicky doesn't allow such a trivial thing as dying to stop her from carrying on as normal.....</p>	Corgi Yearling	2001	0440864151 £4.99

1-3	ROSEN, Michael	The Sad Book We all have sad stuff – maybe you have some right now, as you read this. What makes Michael Rosen sad is thinking about his son, Eddie, who died. In this book he writes about his sadness, how it affects him & some of the things he does to try and cope with it. Whether or not you have known what it's like to feel really deeply sad, it's truth will surely touch you.	Walker	2004	0744598982 £10.99
2-3	SANDERS, Pete & MYERS, Steve	When People Die Sensitive cartoon strip/discussion format dealing with issues of feelings, behaviour etc for young people facing the death of a family member.	Aladdin Books	2004	0749654953 £12.99
3	CREECH, Sharon	Chasing Redbird In the wilderness of the Kentucky countryside, 13 year old Zinny finds the mental and physical space to deal with feelings about the death of her cousin many years ago, and more recent death of her surrogate mother, Aunt Jessie.	Harper Trophy	1998	0064406962 £4.99
3	MOON, Pat	The Spying Game Joe's father is killed in a road accident. Joe is convinced the driver of the other car is a murdered. So is triumphant when his campaign of hate mail forces him and his family to move. Then Joe meets Alex, the other man's son and soon realises just what a devastating effect the accident is having on their lives too.	Orchard Books	2003	1843622017 £4.99
3- 4	CHAMBERS, Aidan	Postcards from No Man's Land Jacob goes to Amsterdam to meet his Grandmother, Geertrui, who is going to take advantage of the Dutch law that allows euthanasia.	Red Fox	2001	0099408627 £5.99
		FOR ADULTS			
	GRANOT, Tamar	Without You: Children and Young People Growing Up with Loss and its Effects Practical and sensitive advice on how best to support children who have experienced bereavement or other kinds of loss, including the suicide of a family member, the death of a sibling, parental abandonment and the loss of a parent through divorce or addiction. How loss is experienced by children and adolescents of different ages,	Jessica Kingsley	2004	1843102978 £17.95

		how the circumstances of loss and the behaviour of other family members can affect a child's reaction to it and the consequences for the development of the child.			
	SMITH, Susan C	The Forgotten Mourners: Guidelines for Working with Bereaved Children Awareness is raised of sensitive issues involved in relating to and assisting children who have been bereaved in different ways. Susan Smith talks about their emotions and behaviour according to their age group and developmental stage. The book explains how to help children and lists what services are available to help.	Jessica Kingsley	1999	1853027588 £9.95
	STOKES, Julie & CROSSLEY, Diana	Beyond the Rough Rock How to help a child understand when someone has committed suicide.	Winston's Wish Out of print, but can be sourced	2001	0953912337 £4.50
	STOKES, Julie	The Secret C – Straight Talking about Cancer An introduction to cancer treatments and possible outcomes for 4-11 year olds.	Winston's Wish Out of print, but can be sourced	2000	0953912302 £3.95
		VIDEOS			
	KILLICK, Steven & LINDEMAN, Stuart	Giving Sorrow Words (Book and video) How can school member feel safe and acknowledged when they bring bereavement into school? How can schools help children with complex and long term challenges of a family bereavement? How can support lessen the risk of learning, attendance, behaviour and work related problems? <i>This video and training material shows how school can deal with these situations effectively.</i>	Lucky Duck	1999	1873942729 £40.00
	ROSEN, Michael	Grief in the Family A 14 minute animated video looking at ways children and young people respond to grief and what adults can do to help. The video stresses the importance of listening to children and answering their questions honestly. <i>Available from www.leedsanimation.demon.co.uk/films/grief.html</i>	Leeds Animation	2002	

Key agencies providing support

“Having survived this, I know I can face anything. I am going to make my life better now”

Sharon aged 18 after death of both parents

■ **Winston’s Wish**

The service provides help for grieving young people and their families. They offer practical support and guidance and help young people to rebuild their lives. They also help families, professionals and anyone concerned about a grieving child or young person.

Their website contains a young persons interactive page and also many pages for schools with resources and advice that may be downloaded as well as support for other agencies.

General enquiries 01242 515157

Helpline 0845 20 30 40 5

www.winstonswish.org.uk

■ **Gloucestershire School Nurse Bereavement Support Team**

Background

In 1995, a partnership was established between six school nurses and Winston’s Wish (WW) to develop a specialist team supporting bereaved young people of school age. In 1998 the team were highly commended by the Queen’s Nursing Institute.

Referrals

The young people typically seen by the school nurse team are those not within the referral criteria for WW, e.g. those bereaved of a grandparent, other relation or friend. Referrals are received from the following: - Winston’s Wish, School Nurse colleagues, teaching staff, parents, child action project, education welfare and other professionals from within the children and young people’s directorate and health. Referrals may then be passed on to WW for individual work and/or attendance at their residential camp should the bereavement prove to be complex. The service is countywide and currently more nurses are being recruited to enhance the service provided, thus ensuring all young people have access to it.

Supervision

Ongoing regular supervision for the group is provided by WW. This facilitates sharing experiences and practice to ensure professional development as well as being kept up to date with current work within WW.

The Process

The referrer is asked to complete a form giving basic details about the person who died, and the young person involved. A meeting is then arranged with the parent/carer prior to the work commencing. An appropriate member of the teaching or support staff from school is also consulted regarding practical arrangements and for working with a young person in school.

Resources used include an introductory board game and a specialised activity book to work through with the young person. Craft materials are also useful for the creation of memories. Up to six sessions are offered. The importance of liaising between home and school during these weeks is emphasised.

Completion of work

Feedback is provided to enable ongoing support from the named school nurse when the intervention has been completed. It might be helpful for the routine to continue for some young people.

School nurses may be contacted through Christine.barnes@glos.nhs.uk or by calling 01452 529781

■ Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service

The service can provide support in a number of ways including the following:

- Practical support and reassurance to school staff
- Helping staff discuss events with one another
- Giving staff, parents and pupils information about normal reactions to a traumatic event
- Suggesting ways to help pupils cope with the event
- Suggesting and supporting staff with group activities for pupils who have been involved
- Needs assessment of children who may be at particular risk
- Support for individual pupils or staff who may need additional help
- Providing information about other organisations who might help

The service is also able to provide specific support when there has been a critical incident. This can be defined as a sudden, unexpected event that is distressing to pupils and/or staff. It might

not have happened during school hours or directly to the school site but it is worth considering that events outside school can have a huge impact. There is additional guidance on this and the reference list contains the details.

The Gloucestershire Educational Psychology Service may be contacted on 01242 525448

■ **Other agencies providing support**

- Samaritans 08457 909090
- Primary Behaviour Management Team 01242 523387
- Secondary Behaviour Management Team 01452 872055
- Youth Offending Service 01452 547540
- GINI Young Persons Substance Misuses Service 01452 503186 www.webgini.com
- Duty officer for County Education Emergency Response Team 01452 427 171

■ **Additional contacts and guidance**

Gloucestershire Children & Young People's directorate has produced guidelines on the following

- Deliberate Self-Harm
- Anti-bullying
- Domestic Violence
- Little Red Book (a pocket sized guide with help lines and websites for use by young people and those who care for them)

These are available through Gloucestershire Healthy Schools Team or downloadable from www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/healthyschools

NHS direct 0845 4647 www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/guide

Letter templates

"We didn't really talk about it at school. The teacher never brought up the subject. I would have like to talk about it."

Juliette aged 11 after mum died

These are two examples of a letter to parents. Please feel free to change them according to the needs of the situation. (Taken, with permission, from Winston's Wish website)

GLOUCESTERSHIRE C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL

<Date>

Dear Parents

Your child's class teacher had the sad task of informing the children of the tragic death of <Name>, who has been a teacher at this school for <number> years.

Our thoughts are with <Name>'s family at this time and in an effort to try and respond to his/her death in a positive, all children have been informed.

The children were told that <Name> died from an asthma attack on <Date>. A number of pupils have been identified as being asthmatic and <Name>, the School Nurse has today reassured them that it is unusual for a person to die from asthma.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings - sadness, anger, and confusion - which are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

The funeral will take place at <Named Church or Crematorium> on <Day and Date> at <Time>. Your child may wish to attend the funeral. If this is the case you may collect your child from school and accompany them to the church.

Yours sincerely

<Name>
Headteacher

GLOUCESTER C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL

<Date>

Dear Parents

Your child's tutor had the sad task of informing the children of the death of <Name>, a pupil in <Year>

They were told that <name> died from an illness called cancer. Sometimes people who have cancer can get better, but other times people die from it. <Name> had been ill with cancer for a long time and died at home yesterday.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion - these are all normal. The children have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

The funeral will take place at <Named Church or Crematorium> on <Day and Date> at <Time>. Your child may wish to attend the funeral. If this is the case you may collect your child from school and accompany them to the church. Please inform your child's tutor if this is the case.

Yours sincerely

<Name>
Headteacher

References

- DfES (2003) *Excellence & Enjoyment*
- Managing Crises in Schools (2005) Gloucestershire Psychology Service
- NHS (2006) *Help is at Hand* NHS www.dh.gov.uk/publications
- Ribbens, McCarthy & Jessop (2005) *Young People Bereavement and Loss* London NCB
- The Health of the Nation (1994) *Suicide Prevention: The Challenge Confronted*
- Winston's Wish

Evaluation



This guidance pack is in development and we would be grateful if you would support us in improving and extending it to suit your needs. Would you please complete this questionnaire and send it to:

Belinda Heaven, The Hucclecote Centre, Churchdown Lane, Hucclecote, Gloucester GL3 3QN

1 Did you find this guidance:

Not very useful Quite useful Very useful Excellent

Comments

2 In general, did the guidance cover the issue of bereavement:

Not very well Quite well Very well Extremely well

Comments

3 Would you recommend this guidance to other professionals?:

Yes No

4 Were there any specific areas you would like to see developed? If so, please say:

5 Would you be interested in contributing to the future development of the guidance? If so, please contact us as the above address.



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Young People, Schools and Bereavement

**Published by
Children and Young People's Services**

The Hucclecote Centre,
Churchdown Lane, Hucclecote, Gloucester GL3 3QN
Tel 01452 427209
Fax 01452 427292

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