



## Halcyon Federation Bereavement guidance

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| <b>Formally adopted by the Governing Board of:</b> | Halcyon Federation |
| <b>Chair of Governors:</b>                         | Holden Cook        |
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### Introduction

Around 1 in 25 school-aged children in Great Britain will have experienced the death of a parent or sibling. Furthermore, 78% of 11–16 year olds report being bereaved of someone to whom they are close, including the death of a friend.

The way in which all staff in our school are able to respond to the needs of bereaved children and young people plays a crucial role at a time of great need.

Research shows that suffering a significant bereavement in childhood has the potential to have a significant impact on children's future well-being. Bereavement can be linked to a number of issues; for example, bereaved children are more likely to be bullied and a change in behaviour can sometimes lead to an increased likelihood of exclusion from school.

We know that many bereaved children and their families feel that the response from their school is sometimes unhelpful and could be much better. It is therefore vital that we listen to children and young people.

### Aims and Objectives of this Guidance

The aim of this guidance is to provide some basic information and practical advice, including approaches that can help all of us to know how we can support bereaved children and their families. We want to offer children appropriate support, which can have a positive and long-lasting impact on children's well-being.

Whilst it may not seem possible to get it right all the time, acknowledging the death of a family member or friend, and taking pro-active steps can make a difference.

## Children's Experience of Bereavement

Children's understanding of death will vary with their age and stage of development. Young children may not have the language or cognitive ability to tell you how they feel. Similarly, adolescents, although they have the understanding and language, may be unwilling to talk to the adults around them.

Children are affected by bereavement in different ways. Some may be sad and withdrawn, others may be angry and display challenging behaviour. Some children show their grief immediately, whilst others may not at the beginning, but later, after weeks or even months. Grief is an ongoing process which children and young people revisit as they grow up and their level of understanding increases.

Children will not simply 'get over it', but with time learn to cope with all the changes. Many bereaved people continue to have a bond with the person who died – in a different way.

## What Schools Can Do to Help

Children and young people will understand death through the language we use to describe it. Using euphemisms and other words for death (such as 'loss' or 'asleep') can be confusing. It is helpful for children if we use the words 'death' and 'died' and do not avoid these. Honesty and clear language around death will help prevent misunderstanding. We will try to answer children's questions honestly, but it is also okay to say 'I don't know, but I will try and find out'.

Staff do not have to be 'bereavement experts' to help grieving pupils. Kindness, compassion and a listening ear go a long way to supporting bereaved children.

Whilst acknowledging that not every bereaved child needs counselling and that it takes time for children to adjust, children and families might benefit from specialist bereavement services.

As a Norfolk School we can make referrals to Nelson's Journey. They are a Norfolk-based charity that supports children and young people aged 0–17 years who have experienced the death of a significant person in their life. They aim to improve the emotional wellbeing of children in a variety of ways including therapeutic residential weekends, activity days, NJ Clubs and therapeutic 1:1 work, as well as guidance and education to parents, carers and professionals.

When children display ongoing problems for a significant amount of time, where problems are not getting better or are deteriorating, or when there are serious concerns such as self-harm, not eating, or not attending school, it would be appropriate to consider a referral to specialist services. Point 1 offers Tier 2 mental health services to children and young people in Norfolk; referrals to Tier 3 services can also be made.

Sometimes the death of a family member might be covered widely in the media. It is helpful to know what information is in the public domain. When children are bereaved by suicide, families are often left with agonising questions. Schools can sometimes be a place where rumours and speculation arise. It is important to acknowledge this and respond appropriately, taking into account the wishes of the child and family. When deaths are investigated by the coroner, perhaps because it was an unnatural death or the cause of death was unknown, this information is usually covered in the media.

The organisation Seesaw offers some helpful tips for supporting children through grief:

- Be there
- Initiate and anticipate
- Listen
- Silence is golden
- Accept and acknowledge the expression of feelings
- Offer opportunities for remembering
- Learn about the grief process
- Help the child find support and encouragement
- Allow the child to grieve at their own pace
- Be patient
- Provide for times of fun
- Give a child choices
- Believe in the child's ability to recover and grow
- Be yourself

We place great importance on working in partnership with parents/carers. Some families may wish to have close involvement with the school, whilst others prefer things to be more private. It is important that we ensure that the children's needs are met, whilst taking account of families' wishes. Children and young people may hold a wide range of religious and cultural beliefs and traditions, and it is important to respect these differences. Whilst respecting families' wishes, it should be remembered that we have a duty of care towards all children. We are committed to meeting the social, emotional and behavioural needs of our children; we will also follow our safeguarding procedures.

## **Immediately After Being Informed**

When a bereavement is reported, staff should consider the following steps:

- Contact the parent/carer to express sympathy – this might be difficult, but it is much easier if you get in touch with the family early on.
- Gather as much information as possible about the circumstances of the death and find out what the child has been told.
- Encourage children and young people to return to school as soon as feels right for them.
- Explain that support will be available for them and that you will discuss this in detail upon their return.
- Share information with all relevant staff – and speak with them again after you have met with the child and family and know their wishes, for example, what kind of support they would like from staff.
- Meet with the parent/carer and child to find out their views on how they would like to be supported. This might be difficult, but unless you discuss this with the child or young person, you will not know what support will be helpful to them.

It would be helpful to discuss with the child and family:

- if and how they would like the information to be shared with their classmates
- who would be the best person to provide support for them, and who they can talk to when they are finding things difficult
- how children could access time out if they are finding it difficult to cope with a lesson (time out cards can be helpful)
- identifying a person who will keep in touch with home
- any pressures around homework and exams

## Short-Term Support

We will be sensitive to the needs of the bereaved child – these might be different for different children. Some children might appreciate the availability of a quiet space, but others might simply want the usual opportunities to be with their friends and experience a sense of normality.

We will also need to be aware of other children who might be affected because they have also experienced a recent bereavement. Children sometimes provide a considerable amount of support to their friends – we may need to consider how they are supported, and whether to make parents aware.

It is helpful to reassure children that their feelings are normal in their situation.

We will monitor how children are progressing academically, as many bereaved children can find it harder to achieve at the same level as their peers. Many children struggle with concentration as the bereavement takes up a great deal of thinking time. Young people tell us that teachers sometimes become frustrated when work has not been completed, without being aware of the child's situation. Good communication across the school is really important. Staff cannot be supportive if information is not shared appropriately – all relevant staff should be made aware.

We will offer praise for achievements and reassure the child that things will improve in time. If needed, we could support the child to catch up with any work missed. We acknowledge that it is a challenging task for our staff to find a balance between allowing for difficulties whilst not lowering expectations. We will notify examination boards of the impact of bereavement where exams are due. We should be aware that children can sometimes feel great pressure to achieve following a bereavement.

It is helpful to be consistent with expectations for appropriate behaviour, while also offering support if a child has difficulties.

Regular 'check in' meetings with a trusted adult should be arranged to monitor progress and address any issues as they arise, offering early support where needed.

## Funerals

Families are all different. Some may hold a large funeral where members of the school community are invited; others might hold a small private funeral. In any case, we should find out the family's wishes regarding attendance of a representative from our school, where appropriate. It is important to discuss who the most meaningful member of staff was to ensure a suitable representative, who knew the child and family well to attend. It is vital to consider staff wellbeing at this point and that there may be some staff who wish to attend.

## Long-Term Support

We are aware that grief does not operate on a timetable, and it may be months or even years later that a young person is most in need of support. As children and young people grow up, their understanding and needs change, and many will revisit their bereavement at different stages of their lives, especially as teenagers.

Our teachers are aware that when tackling sensitive subjects as part of the curriculum, we should not avoid them, but should be sensitive to the needs of bereaved children.

It could be helpful to keep a diary of significant events (such as birthdays and anniversaries of the death) that can be passed on from year to year and to other schools during transition. It may be possible to add these events to our database, which would be accessible to all staff working with the young person.

People sometimes think it best to avoid painful reminders such as Mother's or Father's Day, but giving children the choice of what they want to do is really important. Avoiding the topic can leave children feeling that others do not care, or have forgotten their loved one. Providing opportunities for children to remember their loved one can be really important.

## Supporting Parents and Carers

A death in the family can cause disruption for many months. Family members are grieving, relationships alter and members may take on new roles.

Where appropriate, we will acknowledge the death by sending a card or phoning parents. Parents often report that other people avoid them because they do not know what to say. Coming back to the school playground and bringing their children back to school for the first time after a bereavement can be very difficult. As a school we can make arrangements to make it easier for them, for example meeting them, or allowing them to drop their child off a little earlier or later. We will do our best to support parents in these circumstances. We may ask our Parent Support Adviser to be in touch with the family, as they may be a helpful link for parents.

Keeping in touch with families and letting them know how their children are doing can be helpful. This could be done via home-school books, telephone calls, planners, and similar methods. We will find out from parents/carers what would be most helpful to them. If helpful, we could provide a named link person for families.

## How Staff Will Be Supported

Bereavement is 'not only painful to experience, but also painful to witness' (Bowlby, 1980).

Supporting bereaved children can be very stressful. Support may be needed for a long time, and there are no easy solutions. Witnessing another person's grief can also remind staff of their own experiences of bereavement.

As a school we have a duty of care towards our employees, and we will ensure that staff are appropriately supported when dealing with difficult situations such as supporting bereaved children. Senior leaders are responsible for putting appropriate support mechanisms in place for staff. These should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Staff can also support each other. It is important to know one's limitations. There is only so much staff can offer, and sometimes it is right to consider referring children on to specialist bereavement services.

Being prepared can give staff confidence, which will make it easier to support bereaved children. Training is available for any member of staff, offered by the Norfolk Critical Incident Service and specifically tailored to schools, and we will enable staff to attend training as appropriate.

## **Teaching About Death and Bereavement**

Death happens to children of all ages – it does not wait for them to be old enough to understand. Death can seem like a subject that nobody wants to address. Yet, in a survey by Ofsted of 178 young people about their views on preferred topics in PSHE, 'learning to deal with bereavement' was selected as their first choice (Ofsted: Not yet good enough, 2012). Through providing a curriculum that acknowledges and addresses death and bereavement, we can improve the skills of children and young people to deal with and emerge positively from it.

As a school, we are committed to education about death and the associated rituals and traditions of mourning. We will provide opportunities for discussion that help lessen the stigma attached to death, reducing its status as a taboo subject.

We will look for opportunities to teach about death and bereavement in PSHE, RE, Philosophy and Science, as well as in other subjects where appropriate. Occasionally, staff may feel that they can share their own experience of death and bereavement, which children and young people may find valuable if it provides a basis for class discussion. Sometimes children will begin talking about death and bereavement spontaneously, which can offer a valuable whole-class discussion and further teaching opportunity.

Materials for teaching about death and bereavement are available and can be requested from the Critical Incident Service. A booklist is also available.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

### **Senior Leadership Team**

The senior leadership team will ensure that this guidance is implemented and that a co-ordinated response is provided to bereaved children and their families. They will ensure that all staff know what is expected, and that everyone can contribute in a way that is consistent with the ethos of the school. The senior leadership team will ensure that information is shared with all relevant staff and passed on to other schools at times of transition. The team will put appropriate support in place for staff and enable staff to attend appropriate training opportunities.

### **Governing Body**

The governing body will approve this guidance and ensure that it is implemented consistently across the school. They will review this guidance on a regular basis, involving the headteacher and staff who are delivering support for bereaved children and who are responsible for the curriculum.

## **Further Information**

This guidance has been adapted from the sample bereavement guidance written by the Norfolk Critical Incident Lead Officer, taking account of good practice guidelines and in consultation with bereaved children and parents.