

## How schools can help

**Most grieving pupils do not need a “bereavement expert” they need people who care. Schools, just by carrying on with their usual day-to-day activities, can do a huge amount to support a grieving child. By gently introducing death and grief into the classroom, the fear is removed and children will develop coping skills should someone they know die now or in the future.**

### Normality

For a child, or young person, whose life has been turned upside down, the routines of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may have fallen apart but school and the people within it are still there, offering a sense of security and continuity. For young children and adolescents, school can give relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home. They may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family. There may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young people can find this difficult to deal with.

### A listening ear

Children can be overlooked by family members struggling to deal with their own grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm. When a parent or sibling has died, children and young people can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief.

### The opportunity to be a child

Even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. Loss and grief are very grown up experiences. School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty.

### General support

Keep in contact with home. Discuss concerns but equally important are successes. The family or carers will find this reassuring. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the child is coping.

### Be proactive

Have in school a selection of resources on the subject. Refer to the Booklists and Resources factsheets in this pack for ideas. Stories are a wonderful way to gently introduce young children to the concept of death. Novels and poems offer young people a chance to learn through reading, listening and discussion. For more ideas [www.childbereavement.org.uk/Support/Schools](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/Support/Schools)

When someone dies in your school community, whether the death is one that affects an individual pupil, or of someone known to the whole school community, how you respond will be remembered by everyone affected, child or adult. The school's response will depend on individual circumstances and the needs of pupils, staff and wider school community.

Have a plan. See the factsheet "Writing a Bereavement Policy" and the example policy at [www.childbereavement.org.uk/Support/Schools](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/Support/Schools)

Everyone, child or adult, will grieve in their own way. Try not to make assumptions about what they should be doing, how they should be feeling or what is going to help. When not sure, ask them what they would like to happen.

Someone from school should liaise with any family. Offer to visit if the family would find this helpful. A card or letter of condolence will reassure the family of your support.

### **Breaking sad news**

Avoiding the subject always makes matters worse. It is better to explain what has happened in a sensitive way to avoid rumours and whispers. Use the correct words "death" and "dead" rather than euphemisms such as "lost" or "gone to sleep". Suggestions of [words to use](#) can be found in the schools section of our website.

With a death that has affected your entire school, communicate with staff first and then pupils as quickly as possible. At this stage you probably need to say very little other than expressing sadness and who has died. Correct any misconceptions and say that you will give more information when you have it. Some schools decide to explain in an assembly, others that each teacher individually tells their class.

When the death affects an individual pupil, if possible discuss with the bereaved child what you are going to say before doing so. The child may or may not wish to be present. Consider with the family how giving the news to the school community should be done. The parent, carer or child may wish to write a letter to be read out in school.

Staff and pupils may wish to attend the funeral. Check that this is OK with the family before making arrangements. Think through practical considerations such as how are pupils going to get there, and cover for staff.