

Grieving Children and Young People: the role of school

Guidance for parents and carers

When a child or young person experiences the death of someone important to them, they not only need to adapt to living with their grief within the family home, but also to the challenges of a changed life in the outside world. This will include school. Children spend a large proportion of their time at nursery, school or college, and their social life is often centered on friends made there. The grieving children and young people that we work with at Child Bereavement UK tell us that how their school or college responds is very important to them.

They feel strongly that the response works best when they are consulted and involved in any decisions that may affect them. After her Mother died, Fiona was visited at home by her teacher. *Fiona and her teacher decided together that she would arrive ten minutes after everyone else, giving her teacher time to talk to the class.*

Schools are busy places and many grieving parents and carers don't want to be seen to be making a fuss. It might help to remember that support for your child will be most effective if everybody works together.

How might my child's school respond?

Many schools will respond in a caring and appropriate way, but others may not. Most staff want to help but sometimes, when dealing with this emotive subject, they are not sure what to do or say. Teachers get little in the way of training around Loss and Grief and can feel out of their depth and unsupported. This can result in them saying or doing little, or even in some instances, nothing at all. If you are concerned, give our Support and Information Line a call 01494 568900, and Child Bereavement UK staff can talk you through ways we can help you, your child, and their school. *"I almost felt like another person, so much had changed so quickly."* Guy age 17

Do let your child's school know about us, even if you have no concerns. The 'For Schools' section on our website has guidance for staff, details of our training courses, and information on the Schools Information Pack which offers lots of practical help.

<http://www.childbereavementuk.org/For/Shop/ForProfessionals/SchoolsInformation>

What school can offer a grieving child just by carrying on with normal daily routines

The children we see here at Child Bereavement UK tell us that in order to protect immediate family from further upset, they sometimes find it easier to talk to someone not directly involved such as a familiar and trusted teacher or Learning Mentor. They often comment that going to school gives a sense of normality, and many choose to return immediately after a death has occurred for this reason. Others need to take a few days off, but the longer they are away, the harder it is to return. When grieving, children of any age often view school as a place where they can have some time away from overwhelming emotions and sadness.

Communication with school is important

Let school know about the death as soon as you can. If this is too hard for you to do, ask a friend to act as a messenger. Try to keep school aware of any arrangements such as the date of the funeral. From then on, keep up communication. Let them know of any changed behaviour and of any particular concerns or anxieties your child may have concerning school.

Request that all staff know that your child is grieving, who they are grieving for, and when the death occurred. Some children are reluctant for this information to be given out but if everyone has the basic facts, this prevents insensitive remarks being made by teachers and others because they were unaware of what has happened. Certain lesson topics may bring back painful reminders of the circumstances surrounding the death. This unintended upset can cause real distress for your child and the member of staff concerned.

What can I expect from my child's school?

Reading the schools section on our website will give you a feel for what is reasonable for a school to put in place for any grieving pupil. Adults often make assumptions about what they think a grieving child needs but this can differ from what the child actually wants. So do check out with your child what they would like school to do. Ask for a meeting with whoever is responsible for Pastoral Care and talk through with them what is going to be most helpful for your child.

Below are examples of what many schools will offer a grieving child:

- To meet and talk to your child about how they would like their return to school managed and how best to break the news to their friends and classmates.
- To acknowledge what has happened but without making a fuss so that your child does not feel the spotlight is on them.
- Someone of your child's choice that they can talk to should they feel the need to do this.
- A member of staff who will keep a lookout for your child while they are at school, and be the person to contact if you have any queries or concerns. Learning Mentors often have this role or someone with pastoral care responsibilities.
- A "time out" system to enable your child to have some space away from the hustle and bustle if they feel overwhelmed by powerful emotions. Some schools can organise this as time away from class but still with an adult, others have a quiet corner in the classroom.
- A record of key dates, such as the anniversary of the death, which can often act as a trigger for children to revisit their grief.
- Some flexibility around deadlines for handing in work. Grieving is exhausting and a child or young person may struggle to concentrate on school work. *"Everything seemed really trivial, and all of my work just didn't really matter to me anymore."* A member of our Young People's Advisory Group

All of the above are very simple to put in place and take little in the way of resources: they just need a bit of thought. The most important thing that your child's school can provide is people who care and who have a bit of understanding. It doesn't matter that they are not trained bereavement counsellors. All school staff know how to listen, and really listening is what the children we work with say means more than anything at school. This is one of the messages on the DVD created by our Young People's Advisory Group mentioned below in Resources.

Resources

Child Bereavement UK Schools Information Pack

A series of 22 fact sheets offering guidance, information and details of relevant resources. Topics covered include: Supporting Bereaved Pupils, Bereavement Policies, Suicide, and Age Related Booklists. Only available from Child Bereavement UK.

Cost £10.00 <http://www.childbereavementuk.org/For/Shop/ForProfessionals/SchoolsInformation>

Child Bereavement UK Website – Schools Section

<http://www.childbereavementuk.org/For/ForSchools>

Has a wealth of information including lesson plans suitable for PSHE, and details of Child Bereavement UK training courses for both support and teaching staff.

Child Bereavement UK DVD, "What Teachers Need To Know"

A short film created by the Child Bereavement UK Young People's Advisory Group in which they talk about good, and not so good, experiences at school when someone close to them died.

<http://www.youtube.com/user/childbereavementchar#p/u/4/Y9vNoN0G-H8>

The Little Book of Bereavement For Schools by Ian Gilbert with William, Olivia and Phoebe Gilbert

A short, personal account of how various schools tried and succeeded, tried and failed and sometimes didn't try at all to help the author's children after the death of their mother.

Available from good bookshops and Amazon. <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Little-Bereavement-Schools-Independent-Thinking/dp/1845904648>