

## When a family member is not expected to live

**When a family member is not expected to live, supporting the pupils affected can be challenging and distressing. How children and young people react will vary enormously but whatever the response, staff in school can do a lot to help a child or young person build resilience and develop coping strategies for what may lie ahead.**

### **Honest Communication Is Important**

Facing illness and change in a family can bring to the surface difficult emotions for both the children and adults. Honest communication is understandably often avoided, resulting in a child or young person feeling excluded from something that feels very important but they are not sure what. Staff in school can sometimes find themselves caught in the middle, without the knowledge and information needed to offer effective and timely support. Encourage the family to keep you in the picture and think about a simple way for them to do this. Some families use email, others a family friend or neighbour.

Children and young people are usually far more aware of what is going on than family members realise and often will at some level be aware that the situation is very serious. Physical changes, out of character moods, and medical interventions are all clues. The older the child, the more likely that they will have worked out that death is a possibility.

If a family member is attending a hospice, they often have staff that can assist with what to say, and when and how to say it. If this is not the case, the CBUK Support and Information Line can offer guidance to the family concerned and to school staff.

### **Answering Difficult Questions**

Schools staff can find themselves faced with a question such as “Do you think that my mum is going to die?” Try to establish the pupil’s understanding of what is happening by turning the question around. Respond with something like “Tell me what you think” and take it from there. It is usually not appropriate for school to add information but it is OK to acknowledge what the child already knows. With a young child, let the family know about the conversation but respect a teenager’s need for confidentiality.

### **The Emotional Roller Coaster**

In many cases the course of the illness will be unpredictable and there is often much uncertainty about when a child or adult is likely to actually die. Children and young people can find it very hard to live with this emotional rollercoaster of uncertainty. It is equally stressful for staff in school trying to tread a very careful line between acknowledging distress and encouraging normality whilst possibly coping with their own emotional response to the situation. Unless the death is clearly very close, concentrate on the fact that the dying person is alive and talk about them in school as you normally would.

### **Someone To Listen To Anxieties And Fears**

Try to provide opportunities for a pupil to voice anxieties and fears. It can be easier for them to do this at school with someone familiar, but who is removed from the overwhelming mix of emotions

being experienced at home. It is common for children and young people to feel in some way responsible for the situation so lots of reassurance that there was nothing they said or did to cause the illness will be necessary.

Challenging behaviour, being withdrawn or depressed, can all result from unvoiced and unanswered questions. Using one of the workbooks suggested at the end of this sheet is one way to help a pupil express concerns they have.

It is very common and normal for a well sibling to be jealous of all the attention a sick brother or sister is receiving and then to feel very guilty as a result. Reassure the pupil that this is OK and understandable. Their self esteem may well be low so acknowledging positive behaviours or achievements in school, however small, will help. Try to do this discreetly without making them special or an exception.

### **Helping The Family**

In a school that belongs to a tight knit community, organising practical help from other parents and families can be welcome. Check first that the family is OK with this, but hands on assistance with things like taking siblings to activities or doing the ironing can be a great help for all involved. The family can contact Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Line, 0800 02 888 40 for help and guidance or visit the family's section on the Child Bereavement UK website.

### **Resources**

#### **My Brother and Me**

This pre-bereavement book is designed to help children understand how they and the rest of their family might feel when someone in that family is seriously ill. It offers opportunities to share concerns and fears and ways to manage difficult feelings such as jealousy. Age 4-10. Only available from [Child Bereavement UK](http://www.childbereavementuk.org).

Cost £5.99

#### **When Someone Has A Very Serious Illness** by Marge Heegard

A workbook for helping children and young people learn the language associated with a serious illness and ways of coping when someone is seriously ill. It makes a helpful communication tool to start conversations around difficult and confusing feelings. Available from Amazon.

Cost £7.00

#### **As Big As It Gets** by Julie Stokes and Diana Crossley

Aims to help families cope with the serious illness of a parent or child. It provides a range of ideas for parents and carers including suggestions for what to say and how to offer support. Available from Winstons Wish Tel: 01242 515157.

Cost £5.99