

Breaking Sad News

When someone within a school community has died, it is often hard to know how to break the news. School communities have very active grapevines and it is better to sensitively explain what has happened rather than saying nothing.

Staff

Always try to communicate with staff first and then pupils. Do this as quickly as possible. If the news is given early, it will help to avoid rumours and whispers. Try to do this face to face but if not possible, make sure that other communication methods are followed up with personal contact.

Give staff a few minutes to absorb the news. Remind them of any support available, the school procedure for such situations, and that they can call the Child Bereavement UK Support and Information Line 0800 02 888 40 for guidance, or just a confidential chat.

Staff directly affected will need support and ideally not left on their own while in the classroom.

Pupils

When the death affects an individual, if possible take the wishes of the pupil, siblings, and the rest of the family into account. Schools have a duty of care to all their pupils and sometimes it is necessary to say something before it has been possible to contact the family. In this situation, a simple acknowledgement of the death is all that is needed.

Many schools firstly tell the class or year group most affected and follow this up with a brief acknowledgement during assembly. If the bereaved pupil(s) are at school, ask them if they want to be at the assembly. If not attending school, ensure they are told what was said and to whom.

When the death affects the whole school, again check out that the bereaved family are aware and OK with what you are going to say.

Guidelines for Breaking Sad News

- Whoever is giving the news should prepare themselves with what to say. Staff should be offered help with this.
- Don't be afraid to show emotion - this just shows that you are human but can throw you if you are not expecting to react in this way.
- Start by acknowledging you have some sad news to give.
- Be honest, give the news stating simple facts, use the words dead/died.
- If known, explain where and when the death occurred. Only include how if family are OK with this.
- If not known, say so, and that you will endeavour to find out. If rumours are rife, say which of these are definitely not correct.
- Talk briefly about the person who has died without eulogising them.

- Mention any arrangements already in place.
- Close by acknowledging that not everyone will be feeling sad and that is OK.
- Give pupils something practical and positive to do, such as making cards or writing something.

Other families

It is a good idea to let other parents know, certainly the ones whose children are likely to be directly affected. Initially, the basic information is all that should be given out. Once you have checked with the bereaved family, more details can be given if felt necessary. You may wish to let them know about the fact sheet "Parents and Carers." This will help them answer questions from their children and understand any possible reactions.

Breaking sad news in an assembly

A whole school assembly may not be appropriate or wanted, especially if it is an individual pupil who has been bereaved. However, sometimes this is the best way to give the news, particularly when the death has affected the whole school. The decision will be influenced by the size of the school and if the person who died was well known to the school community, or not. The benefit is that the entire school receives the same news, at the same time, keeping speculation and rumour at bay.

Follow the assembly with some classroom time for pupils to express any thoughts or feelings around the news that they have just been given. Reactions will vary but it is helpful for everyone to be given an opportunity to process the news and respond in some way should they feel the need to. Classes directly affected may welcome the opportunity to write something or make cards.

Suggested words for a Primary School assembly

I have some very sad news to tell you. Jim Jones in Year 5 died on Saturday morning. He was crossing the road with his Mum on the way to the local shop. A car being driven too fast knocked him down.

An ambulance was called and Jim was taken to hospital. The doctors and nurses did all they could to try to save his life but his injuries were too severe and tragically he died. His mum is not injured.

Jim was well known throughout the school for being a Manchester United fan and a very keen member of the football team. He was only nine years old and much too young to die but sadly, very occasionally, accidents do sometimes happen.

Some of you may be feeling shocked at this news, some of you might be feeling rather frightened, some of you might be feeling nothing at all. All of these feelings are OK.

Our thoughts are with Jim's Mum, his Dad, and his little sister Mary who must wish with all their hearts that this terrible accident had never happened.

When you go to your classes after this assembly, you can spend some time thinking about what I have just told you. Your teachers will try to answer any questions that you might have. We can all help Jim's family a little bit by drawing a picture of our favourite memory of Jim or just writing a card that we can send to let them know that we are thinking about them.

The school will probably be holding a special assembly next week for Jim when we can spend more time thinking about him, remembering him, and say a special goodbye. When I have more details I will let you all know. If any of you have ideas for this or would like to take part, I would love to hear from you.

Secondary school

The same principles apply but using language more appropriate for young people.

Guidance on how to organise a Special Assembly or Rememberance Service can be found in the fact sheet Special Assemblies.