

Supporting a bereaved pupil

People are often at a loss as to know what to say or do to help a child or young person who has been bereaved by the death of someone important to them. Every situation is different and children will be affected to a greater or lesser degree, dependent on the circumstances of the death and the nature of the relationship they had with the person who has died. The following are brief guidelines based on what the children and young people Child Bereavement UK support tell us they want from school.

Try not to judge - Grief is a very personal experience, every child and young person will do it their way, even if from the same family. Teenagers in particular resent assumptions being made as to how they should be feeling and what they should be doing.

Check out the facts - Familiarise yourself with the circumstances surrounding the death. Communicate with the family and make sure that what you say will not conflict with the family's wishes. Different information from home and school will confuse a child and complicate their grief.

Acknowledge what has happened - Do not be afraid to use the word 'death', 'I was very sorry to hear of the death of your ...'. If you find words difficult you can discreetly give the pupil a card expressing your care and concern. A card to a bereaved child from his/her class is usually appreciated and helps to keep up contact with school if they are not attending.

Responses will vary - Don't assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care. Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity. Allow them to express emotion and feelings and do not be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness if you have any.

Children and young people need honesty

Although sometimes difficult, it is better to answer questions truthfully. If you are faced with a difficult question, rather than answering straight away, ask the child what they think.

Be prepared to listen - Schools are busy places and your time may be limited but an offer to spend a bit of quiet time with a child who clearly wants to talk will be greatly appreciated. Some will welcome the opportunity to just sit with you but say nothing; for others it is enough to know that you are keeping a look out for them.

If you are discussing something in class that will refer to the person who has died, don't be afraid to do so. Ignoring them might be perceived as a denial they ever existed. If not sure, check it out with the bereaved child first, letting them know your intention.

Give bereaved pupils time - It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school work again. Remember that they will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them. Explain to other pupils how the bereaved child may be feeling and encourage them to be openly supportive.

Resources - See fact sheet: *Books and resources for staff* (included in the pack)