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Bereavement support groups

The bereaved children and young people we help at CBUK tell us what they need is easily accessed, informal support. Also, that they often feel more comfortable receiving this from their peers, or from trusted adults other than parents and carers. Schools are ideally placed to meet this by running a Support Group.

What are the benefits?

The adults in a family are often struggling with their own grief, and they may have neither the emotional or physical capacity to support their bereaved children even if they would like to. For this reason, the support may need to come from somewhere other than home. Schools that have set up bereavement groups tell us pupils who attend:

- build their own coping strategies and naturally start to support one another
- feel less isolated through meeting others in similar circumstances, normalising their experience have an opportunity to express emotions in a safe place and in a safe way
- can find it easier to talk to an adult who is not emotionally involved
- are easier to manage in class and are less likely to become school refusers
- appreciate an alternative to counselling which for some children is not what they need

Which model to use?

There are no right or wrong models, it is very much about what fits with your school. Options that you may wish to consider:

- Open groups provide the flexibility that some pupils require, enabling them to attend sessions intermittently and for as long as they feel the need. However, dependency can build up and endings can be difficult to achieve.
- Closed groups run for a fixed length of time with a set group of pupils. The group dynamics are not disturbed by new members joining half-way through.
- A good compromise is to run a group for a fixed length of time with a set group of pupils but with the option of attending the next one for pupils who feel they need more support.

A semi-structured approach appears to work well. Each session has a loose theme with a simple related activity but with the freedom to allow pupils to do as much or as little of the bereavement work as they feel able to cope with. Bereaved children and young people who attend groups tell us that just being there is in itself immensely helpful.

Sometimes schools run groups just for pupils who are bereaved of a parent. Others open the groups to anyone who has been affected by the death of someone important. For the pupils, it is the shared grief experience that is important rather than the circumstances of the death so a mixture of experiences is usually not a problem, even when traumatic such as a death by suicide. Small numbers are not a problem but too large a group will be. A ratio of around 4 pupils to each adult works well.

Who should run it?

Any staff member with commitment, time and who is secure with their own losses. Learning Mentors and school counsellors are often involved. Bereavement professionals are not required, but some training on Loss, Death and Grief and the impact on children and young people will give confidence.

Referral process

This can be pupil-led by putting up posters in the school and letting anyone who wishes to, come along. Some schools invite pupils considered to be most in need of the support. This will exclude pupils affected by a death but of whom the school is unaware. It is also important to remember the quiet ones as well as those obviously displaying their grief.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality needs careful thought, especially for adolescents and teens. Primary schools normally let parents/carers know that their child is attending a group. For older pupils a similar approach to that used with visits to a school counsellor may be more appropriate, with parents being aware that a bereavement group exists but not necessarily that their child is attending. Pupils will need to be reassured that confidentiality extends to the staffroom and that information will not be shared between staff without permission from the pupil concerned.

Timing

Lunchtime works for many schools, pupils either attend after eating lunch or bring lunch with them. Some schools consider the support so important that their groups are timetabled into the school day. Pupil's absence from class is accepted by peers once the reason why is explained. Staff appreciate that the education of a pupil distracted from learning by grief will benefit by attending. Consideration does need to be given to pupils who find the attention unwelcome. Groups held once a fortnight seem to have a good balance between contact and space to think, but timing is often dictated by the demands of the school timetable.

Important things to think about

- Think through how to respond and who to go to when pupils reveal "tough stuff" or if CP issues arise.
- Identify where to go for help when you feel out of your depth or a child needs more support.
 You can always contact the CBUK Support and Information team for ideas.
- It is very easy to overstep your professional boundaries and get too involved.
- Be aware of the impact on yourself and possibility of your own losses being brought to the surface. It is essential to look after yourself! Make sure all those involved have some sort of regular and compulsory support or supervision.

Resources

See the fact sheet titled "Books and Resources for Staff"

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