



## Moray Educational Psychology Service

# HELPING CHILDREN TO COPE WHEN SOMEONE DIES

Whether it's a family member, friend or member of staff who dies, it can be difficult for school staff to feel confident and competent in knowing what to do. That's normal; death isn't easy for anyone, including children and teachers.

However, we need to recognise that schools are an invaluable source of support. Children need to feel safe and cared for at times of loss. School can acknowledge their emotional needs and can also offer an important sense of normality/continuing life.

## What can we do to help?

To support children, adults in school can:

- Be there to listen. Listen, listen, listen and listen some more. Unless directly asked, it's best not to offer advice.
- Be open to the difficult questions children may have and stay available for children asking questions which have no answers.
- Reassure children that their feelings are NORMAL and that eventually they will pass.
- Reassure children that:
  - It's ok to know/think about the death
  - It's ok to have own feelings which can be different to those of others
  - Grieving doesn't fit into a set time scale and it's always ok to feel the way you do, for as long as it takes.
- Receive children's feelings without any judgement of them.
- Reassure children of their right to grieve. Depending on the circumstances of the death/prior to death children may not think they have the right (e.g. separated families, suicide etc).
- Allow children to express their pain/confusion/anger/sadness etc.
- Give permission for them to tell someone if they feel alone/upset and have an agreed plan for support, such as a safe place or activity they can go to. Highlight this is not a time-limited support – whenever they need it this is OK.
- Allow children to continue their bond with the dead person. They can be encouraged to celebrate their memories of the person and their 'legacy'. Memory boxes (similar to those used in pre-bereavement work) could be used.

## Things to look out for

It is important that schools take account of a child's developmental stage. Young children (approximately the under 7's) have 'magical thinking' when they personalise everything and can believe that their thoughts/feelings/wishes are responsible for what happens. They can therefore believe that they had an influence over events in a way which they

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did not and feel at fault/to blame for the death. Therefore, they may need to know they're not to blame/responsible. From approximately age 6 onwards there is a move from magical to concrete thinking. As a result, adults need to avoid subtleties/ambiguities/euphemisms as they can cause misinterpretation and distress (if not here and now, in the future). For example, it is important to say someone is dead rather than lost, sleeping etc. We also need to be aware that, under stress, adults can revert back to concrete thinking and that children also can also revert to these earlier thought processes.

Only 7% of the school population hasn't experienced a significant loss/change. Death is a normal part of life but we need to remember that the experience of grief is unique to each individual and will be influenced by a range of factors. It is not a linear process; there will be good and bad times. Grief is the price we pay for love. It is the process of grieving, rather than time that heals. Grieving can be very hard work.

Grief can be inhibited by trauma. Even if the events are not traumatic in themselves, they may be in their effects.

Trauma could be evidenced by a child:

- avoiding people or places
- having intrusions (e.g. 'flash backs')
- having extremes of states of arousal:
  - hypo arousal – *shutting down*
  - hyper arousal – *demonstrating 'fight or flight' (e.g. running away)*

Staff should try to be aware of children's individual circumstances. The following factors are important in determining the risk of trauma at the time of or following any bereavement:

- The child's own attachment pattern / relationships with important adults
- Loss history
- Circumstances of death(s)
- Receiving good enough care with emotional availability
- Level of stressors
- Age of child – pre school, P6-S2 highest risk
- Being Looked After

## Other considerations

- As an adult in a school, it is important to look after yourself at what will be a difficult time. Dealing with death is hard as it can 're-awaken' your own experiences of loss. It is important the adults look out for other adults and not just the children: Adults should:
  - Ask colleagues for support.
  - Take comfort in knowing you can only support and not fix the situation. It's normal to feel inadequate or hopeless at times.
  - Have an up to date Critical Incidents policy/procedure which staff are aware of. Deaths can happen any day - don't wait to react in a crisis.

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- In the event of a critical incident, make sure all teachers (e.g. visiting specialists/all subject staff) are aware of the situation, particularly when returning to school is not immediate. Children should never have to explain their absence from class.
- You may wish to give advance warning to children if covering related topics in class or at assemblies to assess if they are appropriate. It may be worth removing the child from that lesson or adapting the content.
- Schools should be aware of the different cultural and religious beliefs which exist within their pupil group and take account of these.
- Children may need to re-visit grief/loss as their level of understanding of the concept changes as they grow up.

## Further Information

### Web-sites & Organisations

- Winston's Wish is a useful website which has practical activity suggestions which could be used in schools. You may also wish to make use of general activities about feelings and relationships if working with a bereaved child.
- If the child has particular additional support needs you may wish to seek advice from national organisations such as the Scottish Down's Syndrome Association, or NAS in the case of a child with an autism spectrum disorder.
- You may also wish to access the Childhood Bereavement Network.
- Sometimes children need more support to cope with death/loss/change. Once this has been assessed to be the case 'Seasons for Growth' and 'Give us a Break' are examples of group programmes which schools may run, they require trained staff. Family or individual counselling maybe appropriate (e.g. through Cruse).

### Books

#### ***For primary aged children:***

- Durrant, A (2003) Always and Forever.
- Varley, S (2002) Badger's Parting Gifts.

#### ***For older children/ adults:***

- Grollman,A (1993) Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to cope with losing someone you love.
- Mallon,B (2008) Dying, Death and Grief: Working with adult bereavement

## Acknowledgements

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- *Content from the following reference was also used: Jewett, C (1994) Helping children Cope with Separation and Loss.*