



IMBERHORNE SCHOOL

Policy Document



The Cornerstones of our
Learning Community

Headteacher: Mr Martin Brown

Policy Name:

Bereavement

Date:

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We believe that the key to becoming a great school is to ensure that all students have access to a happy, challenging and safe learning environment.

Our school is fully committed to the emotional health and well-being of our students and that of our staff. We are dedicated to the continual development of a healthy and thriving school community and strive to work towards this in all aspects of school life. We are passionate about providing an ethos, environment and curriculum that can provide support during difficult times, including a time of death or dying.

Rationale

Every 22 minutes in the UK a parent of dependent children dies, leaving about 41,000 bereaved children each year. Many more are bereaved of a grandparent, sibling, friend or other significant person, and, sadly, around 12,000 children die in the UK each year.

Within our school community there will almost always be some children who are struggling with bereavement – or sometimes the entire school community is impacted by the death of a member of staff or a student. We would hope to not encounter such circumstances, but the statistical inevitability of such an occurrence implies the necessity of having a bereavement policy in place in order that we might be *proactive*, rather than *reactive*, when responding to these challenging situations. Empathic understanding in the familiar and secure surroundings of school may be all the bereavement support some children – or staff – require, though referral to more specialist support should be a consideration where the impact of grief is more complex. Additional information and resources can be accessed at www.childbereavement.org.uk

Supporting students who have experienced the death of a close relative or friend requires sensitivity and care. Alongside this policy guidance from a charity called Winston's wish should be read, this guidance helps staff in schools manage difficult conversations with a grieving student and to understand the emotional responses they may see or witness.

Objectives

The core intentions of the policy are:

- To support students and/or staff before (where applicable), during, and after bereavement.
- To enhance effective communication, and clarify the pathway of support between school, family and community.
- The Children Act 1989 aimed to ensure that the welfare of the child was paramount, working in partnership with parents to protect the child from harm (http://www.careandthelaw.org.uk/eng/b_section2). All intentions of this policy endorse that aim as we endeavour to counter any adverse effects of bereavement and maintain students' emotional well-being.

A procedure aid for schools

A - Informing staff and governors

B - Informing students

C - Informing parents

D - Supporting a student who has experienced a bereavement

(A) Informing staff and governors of a death within the school community

A death can affect the school community in different ways and may depend on:

- The role that the deceased person had in school
- How well known they were in the local community
- Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide or other violent deaths

Experience tells us that adults and children benefit from being kept informed of a death. Rumour and gossip can be very damaging, and can lead to the perception that death is not a topic that should be talked about. Young people have a natural, and healthy curiosity, and if they are not informed of the circumstances or feel they are unable to ask questions; their normal grief process can be obstructed.

The following guidelines may help when informing staff and governors:

- Arrange a staff meeting as soon as practicable. Identify absent staff.
- Provide context around the death, i.e. what preceded the death.
- Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred.
- Be prepared for obvious distress, and feelings of anger/guilt. People may connect the incident to their own personal experience of bereavement, so feelings about past bereavements may need to be discussed. This is perfectly natural.
- To enable absent staff to feel part of a caring team, arrangements should be made to inform them over the telephone if a personal visit is impractical. Consider the relationship between the absent colleague and deceased.
- For a death that may attract media coverage (e.g. if the member of staff was a well-known personality or died tragically), identify a nominated spokesperson to provide a 'news statement' at an agreed time, as a way of dealing with media intrusion. Liaison with the individual's family is essential.
- With death in traumatic circumstances such as suicide or murder, consider requesting bereavement support services - Winston's Wish, Cruse, Compassionate Friends and the Educational Psychology Service (if psychological de-briefing is thought necessary).
- Arrange staff condolences with collaborative agreement if felt appropriate.
- Provide details of someone who can be available to talk things through with a member of staff, parent or child if they are finding the situation particularly hard. This person could advise the family of support services available if required.
- Nominate staff to prepare a newsletter to parents and carers (to be circulated after school).

(B) Informing children and young people

People often think that children do not grieve, but even very young children will want to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly of all, what happens next?

The following guidelines will help you to inform children of the death of a teacher or other member of staff:

- Identify those children who had a long-term and/or close relationship with the deceased to be told together as a separate group. Where possible inform all the students in the smallest group practicable. Class or form groups are ideal.
- Experience has shown that it is more beneficial if all students are informed. It is always a shock when a death occurs in a school even if it may have been anticipated. In the eyes of the students, teachers are part of the fittings and fixtures in school and are not expected to die. Children expect to live forever, and so a fellow student dying whilst still young enough to attend school can also feel quite shocking.

- Provide staff with guidelines on how to inform children. For example:

(i). "I've got some really sad news to tell you today that might upset you. I know most of you will have heard of cancer, and know that sometimes people with cancer get better, but other times people die from it. Mrs Smith, the Geography teacher and Year 11 tutor, has been ill with cancer for a long time. I have to tell you that Mrs Smith died yesterday in hospital".

(ii). "Sometimes people have accidents at work, at home, at school or on the road. People may be hurt or injured in the accident and they may have to go to hospital for treatment. Sadly, there are some accidents that cause people to die. I have some really sad news to tell you that might upset you. Yesterday Stephen, who is in Year 7, was in an accident and he was so badly injured that he died".

- Refer to name naturally, "Mrs Smith died from cancer".
- Children and young people will appreciate time to verbalise their feelings and fears. Allow space for "If only's" to be acknowledged.
- Discussion - allow students to share their own experiences of death, e.g. "When my pet/my Gran died", etc.
- Be honest about your own feelings and experiences, and talk honestly about the relationship that you had with the person.
- Answer student's questions factually. Avoid using euphemisms like 'passed away', or 'lost' etc. Use the words dead, died and death to avoid confusion for children.
- Be prepared for children to say or do the unexpected, experience has shown some responses or apparent lack of response may be upsetting for adults. No apparent response does not mean that a child does not care.
- End the discussion on a positive note - not all people who are ill or have accidents die - many get better. Consider a prayer to remember the deceased and their family. Perhaps co-ordinate an assembly to end discussion.
- Do students want to arrange for representatives to attend the funeral? How will this be managed?
- Try to identify any key answers that you may need to prepare, e.g. the facts about an illness, or dates which may be relevant to the death such as end of school year and changing class or schools.

(C) Informing parents about a death at the school

These are two examples of a letter to parents. Please feel free to change them according to the needs of the situation.

<Date>

Dear Parent(s)/Carer(s),

We have had the sad task of informing the students of the tragic death of <Name>, who has been a teacher at this school for <number> years.

Our thoughts are with <Name>'s family at this time and in an effort to try and respond to his/her death in a positive, all students have been informed.

The students were told that <Name> died from on <Date>. When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings - sadness, anger, and confusion - which are all normal. The students have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

The funeral will take place at <Named Church or Crematorium> on <Day and Date> at <Time>. Your child may wish to attend the funeral. If this is the case, you may collect your child from school and accompany them to the church.

Yours sincerely,
<Name>
Headteacher

...

<Date>

Dear Parent(s)/ Carer(s),

We have had the sad task of informing students of the death of <Name>, a student in <Year>

They were told that <name> died from cancer. Sometimes people who have cancer can get better, but other times people die from it. <Name> had been ill with cancer for a long time and died at home yesterday.

When someone dies, their family and friends have lots of feelings of sadness, anger, and confusion - these are all normal. The students have been told that their teachers are willing to try and answer their questions at school, but I have made available some information which may help you to answer your child's questions as they arise. You can obtain this from the school office.

The funeral will take place at <Named Church or Crematorium> on <Day and Date> at <Time>. Your child may wish to attend the funeral. If this is the case, you may collect your child from school and accompany them to the church. Please inform your child's form tutor if this is the case.

Yours sincerely,
<Name>
Headteacher

(D) Supporting a student who has experienced a bereavement

Information from the charity Winston's Wish is used to help support students. A summary of key information is detailed below. The Winston's Wish guidance should be read in full.

All students who have experienced a bereavement have a nominated 1:1 contact, this individual is in regular contact with home and the student over a given period, the suggested duration for this is as follows:

- For the first month – at least weekly contact with the student and home
- For the second month – at least one point of contact with the student and home
- 3 months – a further one point of contact
- 6 months – a further one point of contact

The above arrangement should be led by the students and/or home.

Following are some simple tips for speaking with young people about death.

- **Be honest.** It is not an easy subject for anyone. If you are upset too – do not be afraid to admit it. Model the fact that difficult feelings are ok, and totally normal. A recent post on our website from a school student said this *“Miss B showed us this website, she wrote down some things about her Nan, and she started to cry when she told us that her boyfriend never met her Nan, and her Nan would love him”*
- **Use clear language.** Trying to avoid the death by using phrases such as “your loss” and “gone to a better place” can frustrate older children and confuse younger ones. A six-year-old who hears that her Dad has been lost will try to find him, because that is what you do when someone is lost. Simply use language which is real and clear; “I was really sorry to hear that your Dad died last week, how are you feeling?”

- **Expect questions**, but don't feel pressured to provide immediate answers. Death often throws up many questions for us all. Some of these may seem straightforward and obvious under the circumstances, such as 'How does smoking cause cancer?' to the more complex 'Why do some people die so young without warning?' If there are questions that you are unable to answer, feel able to say so, and promise to look into providing an answer at a later point. There may be other questions where you have to admit total defeat...this is ok too.
- **Recognise** that every death and every reaction to it is unique. The way in which a child reacts to a death is dependent on their relationship with the person who died, the time of death in that child's development, the nature of the death (was it expected after a long fight against an illness or was it sudden?), the child's understanding of death, their support network and many other factors.
- **Don't assume anything**. Ask the student how they feel, rather than projecting feelings that you might expect them to have. Also, expect that other children in a class might be affected by a death in an immediate family other than their own.
- **Allow time** and space for students to digest the news, find out the facts and discover exactly how they feel. For some, this may be their first experience of someone they know dying.
- **Moving on** - expect children (especially younger ones) to 'move on' fairly quickly. As adults we tend to remain in a feeling or thought for a lot longer than children. If we are sad and reflective, we may be so for many hours. Children may be distraught one moment and then the next, need to ask what is for lunch, or express annoyance that it is raining outside. Although this sometimes shocks us, this is completely normal, so try not to punish it.
- **Act early** to prevent rumours from spreading, or gossip being spread around the school. Our response to death is often something that we mask when in public. Some people mask it with humour. Among children this humour can be less tempered by social graces and so can be very hurtful, as can rumours about a death or an individual. Try to prevent these at all times, but remember that nasty words are sometimes born out of fear. This does not, and should not excuse them, but may help us deal better with the students concerned.
- **Try to normalise** the feelings that a bereaved young person shares with you. They are probably very worried that they are the only person who has ever felt this way. Assure them that feelings of anger, fatigue, fear, worry, stress, sadness, exhaustion, guilt, anxiety, frustration, loneliness, lack of focus etc are all a normal reaction to grief.
- **Acknowledge** that some days will be better than others. A bereaved student may arrive for registration one morning and seem totally fine. The next day, for an obvious reason, or for no apparent reason at all, they may seem completely different.