

ST MICHAEL'S CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOL AND NURSERY

BEREAVEMENT POLICY & BEREAVEMENT GUIDELINES

These guidelines are intended to assist St Michael's Catholic Primary School and Nursery (from here on referred to as "the school") in developing a strategy to respond to a death in the school community, including a member of staff or a pupil. This policy should be read in conjunction with for various other bereavement resources from the Catholic Schools commission. These can be found at the end of the policy

Aims of a Bereavement Policy

To identify key staff within the school and LA, resources and further support services to help the whole school community work together.

To provide a framework for all staff, teaching and non-teaching, to give guidance in how to deal sensitively and compassionately with difficult and upsetting circumstances.

To have clear expectations about the way school will respond to the death, and provide a nurturing, safe and supportive environment for all.

To support pupils and/or staff before (where applicable), during, and after bereavement.

For children to have the opportunity to tell their story, express their feelings, share their memories and develop coping strategies through support by sensitive staff.

A death can affect the school community in different ways and often depends on:

The role the deceased person had within school

How well known they were in the local community

Circumstances surrounding the death, particularly suicide or violent deaths

The following guidelines will be used when informing staff and governors:

Where possible, discussion should take place with the bereaved family and their wishes taken into account before any decisions are made in relation to how and what to tell the staff and wider school community.

Although a Catholic School, it is important to consider any cultural or religious implications of the deceased and the family and seek advice if necessary.

ALL staff (including support staff such as lunch time supervisors, regular visiting teachers to the school etc) should be informed as soon as possible using our normal method of communication, e.g. a whole school staff meeting or team meeting, ensure this includes part time staff and measures are taken to inform absent staff over the telephone. A conversation can be more personal than just receiving comms through an email or text.

If the bereavement happens in the school holidays it is important that the whole school community is informed as soon as possible in the holiday with the agreement of the deceased family. It would be prudent to assign certain staff members eg key stage leads, Senco, office manager etc to be directed to call their own teams and inform them of the death. The same wording should be used throughout as the introduction to the call. Another member of staff eg the Headteacher, Well Being Lead or HSSW should also be available to support whoever has been elected to break the bad news so that they have support as well

Give a factual explanation of how the death occurred and if applicable the circumstances of what happened leading up to the death.

Ensure SLT are prepared for reactions to this news including visible upset 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.

Ensure a member of Senior Leadership is available to members of staff, parents or children if they are finding the situation particularly hard. Bereavement support or counselling should be available to all as necessary. Seek the advice of external support services as appropriate from the LA, Educational Psychologist or the Southwark Diocese.

Be prepared to arrange supply cover or make last minute arrangements to ensure adequate supervision for the children if necessary.

Establish one person as a point of contact for the family to ensure free flow of accurate information to and from the school. This may or may not be the Headteacher dependent on whatever is the most suitable and familiar person in a senior level eg HSSW

Arrange staff/pupil condolences with collaborative agreement if felt appropriate.

Agree a set time for teachers to inform their class what has happened, how this is to be done and EXACTLY what is going to be said. Identify any absent pupils.

Be prepared to follow this up with a special assembly, memorial service or memorial tree/garden...

Arrange for the Wellbeing Lead or Senior Leadership Team to be on hand at the end of the working day for staff to de-brief and reflect upon the day's events and to agree upon any further action or support that may need to be put in place. Staff who will be alone that night could be identified and arrangements made for colleagues to contact them by phone if necessary.

Where possible staff who have requested to attend the funeral or memorial should be released to do so, it may be necessary to seek the advice or permission from the family of the deceased to ensure that certain attendance at the funeral is appropriate.

GUIDELINES FOR INFORMING CHILDREN

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 should be followed to inform children of the death:

Identify children who are most likely to be impacted by the news because they had a close relationship with the deceased or are already bereaved to be told together as a separate group. Where possible inform pupils in the smallest group. This should be done by adults they know eg class teacher or teaching assistant, HSSW etc

It is always a shock when a death occurs in a school even if it may have been anticipated. Children expect to live forever, and so a fellow student dying can feel quite shocking. Experience has shown that it is more beneficial if all pupils are informed.

Provide staff with guidelines on how to inform children; be honest, it is ok to say if you don't have the answers but remember to revisit the question at a later date when you do have the answer.

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.

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.

End up 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.

Pupils may voice a desire to attend the funeral. This should be discussed with the parents of the child who may wish to accompany the child or if unable to, a close adult in school may be selected to go as a means of support.

IN THE DAYS AFTER THE DEATH

It is important to consider any cultural or religious implications and seek advice if necessary.

Ensure nominated staff with responsibilities for supporting staff and children, are available to do so.

It may be necessary temporarily to provide staff cover for their normal activities.

Identify an allocated quiet place where children, young people and staff can go if necessary.

Try to engender an awareness of when people need help and support, particularly those who worked closely with the person who has died and secretaries /administrative staff who are taking telephone calls, dealing with parents etc.

Through the nominated staff member who has responsibilities for liaising with the individual's family, ascertain their wishes about the school's involvement in the funeral, if any.

In line with the families' wishes consider practical issues such as:

- Sending flowers to the home or to the funeral, making a collection etc...
- Who will attend the funeral?
- Cover for any staff who may be going to the funeral.
- Informing the parents of those pupils who will be involved.
- Possible closure of the school. If this is the case remember to tell lunchtime supervisors, caretaker etc. in advance.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING A BEREAVED CHILD RETURN TO SCHOOL

When the child or young person returns to the setting they may want to get straight back into friends, work and routine. They will have been surrounded by grieving family members and often a chaotic household of visitors. School maybe their break from that.

Remember different arrangements will have to be put in operation depending on the age and understanding of the child in question but have some action plans in place to help the child and young people return by:

Identifying a member of the team who will be the main contact point for them and their family.

Ensure **regular** contact, this may be daily or weekly depending on needs and wishes of the family. This helps you understand how they are coping, what support they may need now and in the future, to discuss concerns and worries and plan strategies to cope.

If they stay at home, remember them. Have cards and messages sent to them from appropriate people (peer group and staff they have good relationships with) Activities such as these will give the other children the opportunity to discuss their own concerns or experiences with the family and help them to feel they are doing something positive to support them, you may want to collate them into a book. This death may remind others of their own experiences and so be prepared to support them. You may find out information about a child in your class that you didn't know before. Be ready to listen to them all.

Before they return ensure all staff are aware of the bereavement and the possible effects on them, their behaviour and their learning, so that appropriate care and support can be given throughout the setting. Remember bereaved children and young people have 'physical' illness, such as headaches, tummy aches and feeling sick, as well as mental sadness including lack of concentration, feeling tired, disorganised anger and frustration. These will have an impact on work load and learning. Monitor how things are going on their return and maintain communication with all staff involved.

Maintain normal rules and expectations of behaviour. This is important for the children and young people within the setting and the child or young person who have been bereaved. The rules and expectations are all part of the 'normal' routine and will help to make them feel secure. Remember the impact of bereavement on the whole family when giving sanctions and the impact the sanctions may have on the whole family

Consider 'time out' strategies that suit the child or young person and the setting. Time out cards, signals or signs can help them to exit the room quickly if they are feeling vulnerable or emotional. Make sure they have a safe place to exit to.

Remember, there is no set pattern or time limit to grief – It is a unique experience and the process is a lifelong one. At different ages and during new or transitional times they will have new questions requiring answers and questions requiring a re-visit of what happened; to develop a better understanding and acceptance.

It is not unusual for bereaved pupils to take time off school during the early stages of their bereavement. For some, the need to be with their families will be strong, and indeed they may suffer from separation anxiety when the time comes for a return to school. For others the familiarity, stability and routines of school life may prompt an early return. The time away from school will vary from pupil to pupil but when they do return, they may have a number of concerns – you will only know what these are and how they might be resolved if you ask. Some of the more common concerns might be:

- **How will staff and peers react**– who has been told, what do they know, what will be said, how much will I have to say to people?

You can help by - meeting with them to welcome them back, acknowledge the death and talk through their concerns. Saying something simple like *“I am sorry to hear that your dad died – sometimes it helps to talk about it and if so, who would you like to be there for you?”* is usually much appreciated by them. If possible offer them choices about how things should be handled and what support would be helpful. Let staff and classmates know how they want to be received and supported.

- **Fear of sudden emotional outbursts** – anger, distress, panic...

You can help by - normalising grief reactions and giving them choices about what strategies will help them to cope in the classroom e.g. able to leave lessons without fuss – “exit card” system, where they can go, who they can talk to.

- **Fear when they realise they may not remember what the deceased person looks like**

A laminated photo of the deceased person may give enormous comfort when the visual image begins to disappear. A special teddy or other memento will often give great comfort in times of distress and upset. They may also want to show this when talking about the person who died. It should be stressed that whatever helps the child within reason should be encouraged.

- **Fear of being behind with work and unable to catch up**

You can help by - clarifying with other staff what is essential to accomplish and what can be left, and offering appropriate help to achieve what needs to be done.

- **Inability to concentrate and feel motivated or sit still**

You can help by - Reassuring them that this lack of motivation and concentration is normal and will pass. Offer shorter more manageable tasks, write down the task, give encouragement for achievements, and minimising difficulties can often help.

- **Family grief impacting on normal family functioning**

Disrupted routines, sporadic meals, chaotic bedtimes are possible reasons why they may be inadequately prepared for school, does not have the necessary equipment, and may be tired or hungry.

You can help by - Talking with them to ascertain where areas of difficulty lie and try and work out strategies with them and their family to help keep things on an even keel in school. Identify their strengths and help them build on them.

- **Unable to meet homework/project deadlines because of altered responsibilities within the family and home**

You can help by - helping them work out and meet priorities. Be flexible where possible and offer additional support where needed.

- **Forthcoming examinations**

You can help by - Explaining the process of notifying examination boards and the possible outcomes.

GUIDELINES FOR PROVIDING ON-GOING SUPPORT FOR A BEREAVED CHILD

Again dependent on age and understanding of child:

If the child/young person thinks it would be helpful and friends agree, establish a peer support network – ensuring that those helping are given appropriate support themselves or seek help outside, for example, by making a referral to Simon Says.

Make a note of significant dates which might affect the pupil, e.g. date of death, birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries. Make sure other members of staff are aware of these and the possible impact these may have. Don't be afraid to acknowledge these potentially difficult times with them e.g. *"I know Christmas is coming up and it might feel a very different and difficult time for you all this year without your Dad – so don't forget, if it helps to talk you can always come and see me"*.

Consider possible reactions to class/assembly topics. Discuss how these difficulties might best be managed with them e.g. if making Mother's day cards do ask them if they wish to be included in the activity too, very often the answer is 'yes' as they still have a parent, they just can no longer see them, but still want to remember them.

Look out for signs of isolation, bullying or difficulties in the playground – bereaved children/young people are often seen as vulnerable and may become a target.

Consider using books/activities to help explore feelings and ideas about death as part of the normal school curriculum

Be alert to changes in behaviour – these may be an indication that they are more affected by their bereavement than they are able or willing to say. Reactions may present themselves months or years after the event, and it may be difficult for staff and others to relate behaviour(s) to the bereavement.

Follow up absences – absence could indicate bereavement – associated problems at home or school.

At transition time make sure the new class teacher and/or school are aware of the bereavement and support in situ.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING A CHILD WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

All children benefit from being given simple, honest “bite size” pieces of information about difficult issues - often repeated many times over. For further support visit www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx .

When talking about death and bereavement with a child with learning difficulties it might be helpful to consider: -

- **WHO** should be key worker working with the child and family - inform parents who this person will be and keep in contact, this should be someone they ALREADY have a good relationship with.
- **WHERE** is the student most receptive to new ideas? – quiet room, pool, outside. Use this space for talking with them.
- **WHAT** should be talked about? (as agreed with parents). Ensure that you use the same language and ideas as the family to avoid confusion.
- **HOW** is new information normally given? - signs, verbally, pictures. Use their normal communication methods to talk about illness and death.
- **HOW** is new information normally backed up? – you will probably need to repeat information a number of times over a long period. Do you need to make a social story? (www.speakingspace.co.uk will assist with this)

- **PROCEED** at a level, speed and language appropriate to them.
- **BUILD** on information given – small bites of the whole, given gradually will be easier to absorb.
- **REPEAT** information as often as needed.
- **WATCH** for reactions to show the child understands – modify and repeat as needed.
- **FOLLOW** the child’s lead – if indicating a need to talk or have feelings acknowledged, encourage as appropriate.
- **WATCH** for changes in behaviour to indicate the child is struggling more than they can say and offer support as needed.
- **MAINTAIN** normal daily routine as much as possible.
- **LIAISE** with other agencies involved with the child to ensure accuracy and continuity of information.

The following are Support materials from the Education Commission for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Southwark which should be accessed and read along side this document

<https://www.rcaoseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/1.Guidance-on-FIRST-RESPONSE-regarding-Bereavement-in-Schools.pdf>

<https://www.rcaoseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/3.Sudden-Bereavement-flow-chart.pdf>

<https://www.rcaoseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/4.Sample-memos-letters-and-school-website-notices.pdf>

<https://www.rcaoseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/5.School-assemblies-at-times-of-bereavement.pdf>

<https://www.rcaoseducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/6.Dealing-with-loss-Primary.pdf>