

**Child Bereavement UK** Call our [Helpline 0800 02 888 40](tel:0800 02 888 40)

## Supporting a bereaved student in our school

**Bereaved young people in school need the stability of a familiar routine with caring adults.**

- Every 22 minutes a parent of dependent children dies in the UK
- Up to 70% of schools have a bereaved pupil on their roll at any given time
- 92% of young people will experience a significant bereavement before the age of 16 years

### **> Managing bereavement: A guide for schools**

This guide is free to download and offers schools and educational settings guidance, support and information when a death occurs in the school community, when a school is facing an expected death or when a pupil is facing bereavement.

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### **Contact with home**

Having good contact with the family will enable you to access accurate information, to understand what the student has been told and to reassure those caring for the young person.

Remember to share the pupil's successes as well as any concerns you may have. Grieving young people can display altered behaviours in different situations and good communication with home will provide a more realistic picture of how the pupil is coping.

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### **Young people need information**

Adults naturally want to protect, but young people have a much greater capacity to deal with the harsh realities of life than we realise, as long as they are told in an appropriate way. Even a very sad truth will be better than uncertainty and confusion. A young person will search for the truth and may find it very difficult if they hear details from outside their own family.

Do not be afraid to use the word "dead." It may feel harsh but euphemisms such as "lost" or "gone away" only create confusion and misunderstandings.

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### **> Children's understanding of death at different ages**

Young people mature at different rates and their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age.

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### **> What helps grieving children and young people**

Young people, like adults, will grieve in different ways and their responses to a bereavement will depend on their age, understanding and relationship with the person who died. It is important to avoid making assumptions about how they are feeling.

Be aware of changing relationships and friendships. A bereaved pupil may find their peers do not know what to say or do and this can lead to isolation and loneliness. Insensitive remarks or even deliberately inappropriate comments are not unusual.

Ask a bereaved student to think about what they need and want from their friends, teachers and adults in school. This will offer them an element of control and give clarity to those wanting to help. Bereaved young people tell us that they welcome the flexibility to leave a lesson if they unexpectedly become overwhelmed by their feelings of grief, as long as this is not viewed as 'poor behaviour' by members of school staff.

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### **> Explaining funerals, burials and cremation**

A young person may know what a funeral is but have no idea about what happens and what is expected of them. It is important to make sure they have a chance to talk about the funeral and ask any questions. You may be asked by a family for advice about taking a pupil to a funeral and some families are concerned that a funeral is too "adult" a ritual.

When someone dies, most people gain some comfort from an opportunity to say goodbye at a funeral. It is no different for young people. As long as they have been prepared and given the choice whether to be there or not, they find it a helpful experience.

You could reassure them that none of the children and young people that we support at Child Bereavement UK regretted choosing to attend the funeral of someone special to them. Those who were not given the option deeply resent not being included, despite this decision having been made with the best of intentions.

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### **Acknowledge what has happened**

The most helpful thing that you can do for grieving students, is to acknowledge what has happened. Keep it very simple, "I was very sorry to hear that \*\*\* has died."

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### **Offer simple choices**

A bereaved young person can feel overwhelmed and out of control. By offering simple choices, a school can help a pupil to feel in control of at least one aspect of their life, particularly in relation to how they manage their grief in school.

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### **Try to answer questions honestly**

It is important to find out what has been said to the pupil at home as it will be confusing if explanations differ. Adults act as a role models so it is helpful if everyone can take the same approach. Young people need an accepting and supportive environment where they feel safe to ask questions and share feelings.

What they understood as a younger child will be different from their present understanding; the meaning and the impact of what has happened will change and deepen. They may need more detailed explanations in line with their maturity and they will have a greater need for clarity and facts.

When they ask difficult questions which you are unable to answer, ask the student what they think or ask them what they have been told so far and who they could ask to get the information they need.

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### **Boost self esteem**

Bereaved young people can experience feelings of low self-worth and lack of self-esteem. However, they often have a maturity beyond their years, a greater appreciation of the value of life than their peers and can be less judgemental than others their own age. These are very worthy attributes to highlight to a young person who is struggling to think of themselves in a positive light.

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### **Adults as role models**

If the adults around them can express their emotions, a young person will know it is OK to do the same. The young people that we work with at Child Bereavement UK tell us that they prefer support from adults they already know and trust. Taking part in an activity helps a teenager to feel less pressurised into talking. Just being with an adult who they know cares is sometimes enough. When ready, they might start a conversation about what has happened, but don't expect it.

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### **Give reassurance**

Children who are grieving can feel completely overwhelmed by powerful feelings and emotions that they do not understand or expect. They may not even know how they are feeling, so adults should not expect them to be able to answer the question, "How are you?" It can be more useful to ask how things are at home, to be flexible with homework deadlines or to offer help to catch up with any work they may have missed.

A bereaved pupil can find any transition particularly difficult. Routines become important to them and they may react to a change in school environment. Young people may feel reluctant to be away from their family members or significant people, particularly on school trips or overnight stays.

Try to prepare them in advance for any changes, where possible, and address any anxieties they may have.

### **Related resources and information**

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/professionals-and-training/>

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

<https://www.winstonswish.org/supporting-you/supporting-a-bereaved-child/>



### Short guidance films

Our short films are delivered by support practitioners and cover a range of topics on grief and bereavement, providing guidance on what can help.



### Books and resources

A list of books and resources relating to grief and bereavement and what may help.



### Others' experiences

Some bereaved families find it helpful to read about other peoples' experiences and how the support they have received has helped them.

**Featured**



• **Developing a bereavement policy or charter**

- **Support for the family**
- **Support for yourself**