

## Critical Incident Team

### Some Guidance On How Staff in A Pre-School Setting Could Manage A Bereaved Child

1. Keep language concrete and specific when talking about death. Avoid euphemisms eg "**Mummy has gone away**" – child's reaction is "why didn't she take me? Or "**God took Mummy because she was good**" – child's reaction "I needed her" – fear of being good or anger against God or "I might be taken". Another euphemism is "**Mummy is sleeping forever**" – child's reaction – fear of going to sleep. So use clear, unambiguous language to avoid misinterpretation.
2. Young children are not able to understand that death is irreversible, but they can understand the analogy of death being like a broken toy for example. You could explain that the parent's body has stopped working and it will not do the things it used to do like walking, talking, moving or breathing. The dead person does not feel anything any longer, is not sad, and is not hurting, feeling cold or feeling ill. This applies of course if staff find themselves in the position of having to explain what dead means.
3. Answer questions honestly and openly. Be honest if you don't know the answer. Again keep answers specific and factual. It's important that children feel it is OK to ask questions and that they have permission to talk about death. Children cannot be protected from sad things and it is OK if adults show they are sad too. This is modelling good behaviour and that it is OK to express feelings. Try not to think that the subject should be avoided for fear of upsetting children.
4. Take cues from the bereaved child. If they want to talk about their dead parent and ask questions, then be willing to listen and answer if you can. If they want to get on and play then that is OK too. Some children may regress because of their loss of safety and security. This is normal. Be patient and understanding and continue to provide a safe playing environment.
5. Liase with the family as you need to know exactly what the child has been told and how the death has been explained. If you are constantly being asked questions you cannot answer then seek guidance from the family as to what you should say.
6. Little children may demonstrate their uncertainty of what has happened through play and adults in pre-school settings should be alert to observing and clarifying reality if necessary.