



Supporting bereaved children returning to school after Covid-19

Many children and young people will have experienced bereavement during this time period, and this will have brought some unique issues.

Children who have been bereaved during this time period may not have been able to access support in the usual way from their wider support network. They may not have had opportunities to communicate with their friends and other trusted adults outside of their immediate family. They may not have been able to take part in funerals and have missed out on opportunities to say good-bye to a loved one.

Experiencing the death of a family member during this time of physical distancing may lead to disenfranchised grief. Doka defines this as ‘grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned’ (Doka, 1989).

Children will have also missed out on the experience of normality whilst attending school, which often provides relief from the grief at home.

When returning to school, experiences of children will vary widely. For bereaved children this may have been a very difficult time, whilst some other children may have enjoyed their time away from school.

People deal with the current situation very differently; a small number of children will have experienced this period as traumatic. Whilst some children take comfort from talking about the past few weeks and the events that have happened, other children will want to go back to the normality of school, which schools may not be able to provide. It is likely that schools will have to make some considerable adjustments when they open, and they may also want to deliver a recovery curriculum.

If children have experienced the death of a family member through Covid-19, they may also continue to worry about Covid-19. An increased thinking of death and safety, problems with sleeping, eating, anger and attention can all be part of how children deal with their experiences.

When providing support, the following may be useful to consider (Psychological First Aid, Scotland, 2020):





Please consider the following, which has been adapted from our sample bereavement policy for schools:

After being informed of bereavement

- Contact the parent/carer to express sympathy – this might be difficult, but it is much easier if you get in touch with the family early on.
- Gather as much information as possible about the circumstance of the death, and find out what the child has been told.
- Offer the opportunity for children to come back to school if possible – find out about any worries or concerns about returning. It may be difficult for children to come back whilst the family is still worried about others becoming ill with Covid-19. If this is a particular concern, ensure that this is discussed with other professionals such as the Critical Incident Lead Officer, your Educational Psychologist or from colleagues from the attendance service.
- Explain that support will be available for them and that you will discuss this in detail upon their return.
- Share information with all staff – and talk with them again after you have met with the child and family and know their wishes, e.g. what kind of support would they like from staff.
- Talk with the parent/carer and child to find out their views of how they would like to be supported. We all acknowledge that this might be difficult, but unless you discuss this with the child/young person you will not know what support will be helpful to them.

Discuss

- if and how children would like the information to be shared with their classmates
- who would be the best person to provide support for them, and who they can talk to when they are finding it difficult
- discuss how children can access time out if they are finding it difficult to cope with a lesson (time out cards can be helpful)
- identify a person who will keep in touch with home
- discuss pressures of homework and exams

Short-term support

Be sensitive to the specific needs of the bereaved child at this current time– these will be different for different children. Some children might appreciate the availability of a quiet space – but others might just want the usual opportunities to be with their friends and experience a sense of normality.

Younger children may usually be comforted by physical contact, a little hug. This may not be possible at the moment. Schools may wish to consider having a large cuddly toy accessible for children to hug.

Talking about Covid-19 can be difficult for children who have experienced a bereavement in this time – be mindful of this.



Be aware of friends - children sometimes provide a considerable amount of support to their friend – you may need to consider how they are supported, and whether to make parents aware.

Reassure children that their feelings are normal in this very unusual situation.

Children may struggle with difficulties with concentration as the bereavement takes up a lot of thinking time. Young people tell us that teachers sometimes get annoyed with them as they had not completed work – being unaware of their situation. Good communication across the school is really important – particularly in secondary schools. Staff cannot be supportive if schools are too precious about the information they share – all staff need to know.

Give praise for any achievements and reassure the child that things will improve in time. Be mindful of the child's ability to fully engage in learning and the quality of the work they are able to produce – it can a challenging task to find the right balance between allowing for difficulties whilst not lowering expectations.

Be consistent with expectations for appropriate behaviour, but do offer support if a child has difficulties.

Arrange regular 'check in' meetings with their trusted adult to monitor their progress and take account of issues as they arise, offering early support.

We are aware that grief does not operate on a timetable, and it may be months or years later that a young person is most in need of support. As children and young people are growing up, their understanding and needs change, and many will revisit their bereavement at different stages of their life, especially as teenagers.

Supporting Parents/Carers

A death in the family can cause a disruption for many months. Family members are grieving, relationships alter, and members may take on new roles. Parents/carers may continue to be worried about the potential of others being affected by Covid-19.

Coming back on the playground, taking their children back to school for a first time after a bereavement can be very difficult at this particular time when everyone may be exchanging stories about how they spent time at home during Covid-19. Ensure you have a conversation with parents/carers and consider if you can make arrangements to make it easier for them, e.g. meet them in reception, allow them to drop their child a bit earlier/later, etc.

Keeping in touch with families and letting them know how their children are doing can be helpful. Find out what would work in the current situation and provide a named link person for families if at all possible.



How staff will be supported

Bereavement is 'not only painful to experience, but also painful to witness' (Bowlby, 1980).

Supporting bereaved children can be very stressful, especially at this time when there is so much else to think about. Witnessing another person's grief can also remind staff of their own experiences of bereavement.

As a school you have a duty of care towards our employees and will need to ensure that staff are appropriately supported when dealing with difficult issues, like supporting bereaved children. Headteachers are responsible for putting appropriate support mechanisms in place for staff. They should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Staff can also support each other. It is important to know one's limitations. There is only so much staff can offer, and sometimes it is time to refer children on to specialist bereavement services.

Being prepared can give staff confidence, which will make it easier to support bereaved children – there is training available for any member of staff, offered by the Norfolk Critical Incident Service and specifically tailored to schools.



Support and advice available to children and families

Norfolk Educational Psychology Service, Website information
<https://www.norfolkepss.org.uk/bereavement-during-covid-19/>

Nelson's Journey, Norfolk bereavement charity
<http://www.nelsonsjourney.org.uk/contact-us/>

<https://www.penthaligonsfriends.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Supporting-children-with-bereavement-during-COVID19-situation.pdf>

Grief Encounter, Website information and helpline
<https://www.griefencounter.org.uk/serviceupdate/>

Winston's Wish, Website information and helpline
<https://www.winstonswish.org/telling-a-child-someone-died-from-coronavirus/>

Cruse Bereavement Care, Website information and helpline
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/children-and-young-people>