



Tickford Park Primary School

Bereavement Policy

January 2024

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Personal, Social and Health Education and Citizenship Policy

Bereavement Policy

INTRODUCTION

'Death is a subject that nobody ever wants to address. It is almost inevitable though, that at some point in every teacher's career, the school community will be affected by a death in some way or another. This might include the death of a pupil, the death of a staff member, the death of a pupil's family member, or the death of a key member in the school community'
Winston'sWish

It is essential that the school is well prepared and consistent in its dealing with events in the case of a death. Sometimes death can be prepared for and sometimes it is unexpected. In all cases it affects the emotions of all and a procedure needs to be in place to ensure the event is dealt with sensitively and appropriately by all.

At TPPS we have developed a policy as a staff in which we have agreed on strategies we will employ in the event of a death.

AIMS

- To ensure all staff have an understanding of how children deal with bereavement at different ages
- To establish staff protocols for dealing with bereavement if the situation occurs
- To ensure all staff are aware of the Bereavement Box and its location to allow the school to deal with a bereavement consistently and effectively

TPPS' APPROACH TO DEALING WITH BEREAVEMENT

At TPPS all staff agree to...

- * Be honest
- * Use clear language
- * Expect questions
- * Recognise that every death, and every reaction to it, is unique
- * Allow time
- * Act early
- * Reassure that all feelings are OK

Guidelines for talking to children dealing with a bereavement

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.

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 pupil 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 pupils 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 pupils 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 pupil 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.

Understanding how children cope with Bereavement

This policy aims to support staff during the difficult time of bereavement and ensure that all staff are able to fulfil their agreement.

Children aged 2 to 5

Children at this age tend to think that death is reversible and that people who have died can come back. They can also become convinced that it was something they said or did that caused the person to die. They need to be reassured that this is not the case and it was not their fault. They need specific language such as 'mummy has died' rather than we have lost someone etc. This must be discussed with the relatives of the person who has died, especially if they have siblings or family within the school. What the family has told the child must be considered and respected.

It is not unusual for children at this age to revert to behaviour patterns they had when they were younger such as bed wetting and thumb sucking. Children are will want to make sense of the loss and may ask repeated questions. Reading books on death and loss, playing , drawing and opportunities to talk about their worries and feelings will help them deal with the loss.

Children aged 6 to 9

At this age children begin to develop an understanding of death as irreversible and something that will happen to all living things but they may still be confused about it. They may also think of death as something spooky. It is important they are able to talk about their feelings. They may display a curiosity with dead bodies, this is natural and requires clear explanations. Children may also complain about their own aches and pains; or somatic complaints. This is normal but it is important that routines are maintained. Children at this age may have some difficulty in expressing their feelings verbally and may retract into themselves. It is important to avoid clichés such as 'you are a brave boy' as this may be interpreted that you may not want them to share their feelings.

Children aged 9 to 13

In this age range children are much more aware of the finality of death and the impact the death has on them. They are able to understand death as both concrete and abstract. Children may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers. The death of someone important can make them feel different at the very time they want to be the same as everyone else. It is important to find ways to build their self-esteem. Children at this age are beginning to think of the longer term consequences of the loss of the relationship. They are aware of the loss they feel in the present but also of the losses they will experience in the coming months and years when they encounter certain important milestones or occasions and realise that they won't be able to share these with the person who has died. At this age children are beginning to move away from dependence on the family and they start to form important relationships with other children. The death of someone important can easily destabilise them, leaving them feeling unsafe and more dependent on the family. Their ability to manage their feelings may be disrupted and lead to mood swings or more definite up's and down's in their feelings. Big emotional releases (such as anger or distress) are not uncommon but can be scary for children at this stage. They will benefit from your willingness to listen and your assurances that the feelings are normal.

How we will support a child who has experienced a death in their immediate family

In this case the family should be called to see if the child will be taking some time off school or coming in as usual to maintain a routine. Either is acceptable. A visit to the family would also be helpful if they seem open to the idea.

The pupil should be consulted on whether they would like the teacher to explain what has happened to the class. It is advisable that the class is told. The pupil may also wish to tell the class themselves and answer their peers questions. The choice must be entirely the pupils.

If the pupil takes some time off their classmates can make a card that can be taken to the home conveying the class' condolences but also that they are looking forward to the pupils return to school. During the home visit the pupil can be told of general events in the class no matter how trivial or funny! This will keep the home-school bond strong.

When the child returns to school they may

- * be tired
- * have less concentration
- * have heightened sensitivity to comments
- * be argumentative

Patience is required but normal rules and behavioural expectations must be maintained. This is essential to maintain routine. These effects may not take place until months after the death but all staff must be aware and be sensitive. Comments such as 'What would your Dad think about you doing that?' are not helpful and just increase the false guilt, shame or emotion they may be experiencing.

The pupil will have time to work with an adult on a one to one basis to make a special memory book or box. This could be filled with photos, stories, cards, letters and anything they feel will

help them maintain their memories. They could also make a calendar of important dates if they are worried about forgetting birthdays etc.

The pupil will also be offered the chance to create a First Aid Kit, a collection of things that make them feel better on bad days.

Whole school or class activities will not be appropriate in this situation. The pupil may want to do all, some or none of the proposed activities. They may want to talk straight away, or not for several months. Knowing that staff are available, honest, understanding and trustworthy will be a great comfort to the pupil concerned.

A Death in the School Community

A death within the school community can have a huge effect on the school as a whole. This needs to be far more managed by the school than a death in an individual family.

How we will support the children when there has been a death in the School Community

Breaking the News

This is usually only done when a student or a staff member has died.

First, it is important to acknowledge that this is a serious assembly and that there will be time at the end for discussion back in class groups. If a student or staff member has died, it will probably already be the subject of much speculation.

The assembly will begin in the following way:

"Many of you may have heard a story in the playground or in the newspapers about xxx. There are many different stories circulating that I have heard. Some of these stories are based on fact, others are totally made up. What I want to do right now, is to tell you the truth, and as much of the story as I know. There may be other things you want to know, but that may not be possible right now, but we will try not to exclude you from anything that you do need to know"

"I am sorry to say that over the weekend xxx died. For some of you that may come as a real shock, and hearing those words is really difficult. For others you may feel that you already knew that. I am simply going to wait for a moment while we all think for a moment and compose our thoughts. Then I am going to tell you how he died, and what we are going to do to remember him".

Children react better when they all know the information. This also makes it less easy to pass on and create rumours. Pupils will also want to know all about the funeral arrangements, what will happen to their class if they are a class teacher.

All staff will be supported and will not have to teach the lessons or deliver the news if they feel this is too difficult for them.

Memory Stones

This section of the assembly can be easily adapted to suit any size gathering, and take little or no preparation. The decision may be made to do this in individual classes rather than as a whole school or keystone.

The concept of memory stones is a very simple one and is a very simple way to help pupils to speak honestly about their feelings and their memories.

First, hold a jagged, rocky pebble up high. Either you or some pupils should then describe it. Ask a pupil to hold it tightly and squeeze it in the palm of their hands – how does it feel? Not nice, it may even hurt a little. Use this pebble to explain that there may be some difficult memories or feelings that some pupils have right now. They may be struggling with the way in which the person died, or they may be feeling guilty that they did not actually like the person, and the last words they shared were nasty ones, a fact which they now really regret.

Next, hold aloft a normal pebble. Again, you may want to ask pupils to describe it. You are looking to find words such as “normal” “smooth” “ordinary”. State that this stone signifies the ordinary, everyday memories that pupils may have of the person who died; the fact that they ate prawn cocktail crisps or liked English lessons.

Finally, display a shiny, precious gemstone. The characteristics of this stone are that it is sparkling and precious, it looks great. Use this to explain that we will have some great memories of the person who died. It maybe a special school trip or activity or a particularly nice moment shared with that person

All three stones are important and the feelings and memories described by them are all true. The stones can all be held together in one hand, and the memories can all be held in our minds together.

Depending on the size of the group and their closeness to the person who has died, it may be good to let each child hold the set of stones. This will help them to remember the point and manage their feelings.

(Memory Stones are in the Bereavement Box)

RESOURCES

*Bereavement Box Developed by the PSED coordinator containing memory stones, staff agreement, guidelines and stories for each year group.

– this kit will be set up in advance so it can be quickly accessed when needed.

* Winston's Wish Helpline

*Harry Rainbow

*Willen Hospice

LINKS TO OTHER POLICIES

Within the PSED scheme of work children cover the topic of Loss and Bereavement