



## **Managing a Bereavement in an Early Years Setting** **(Resource and information pack)**

### **1. Useful Contact details**

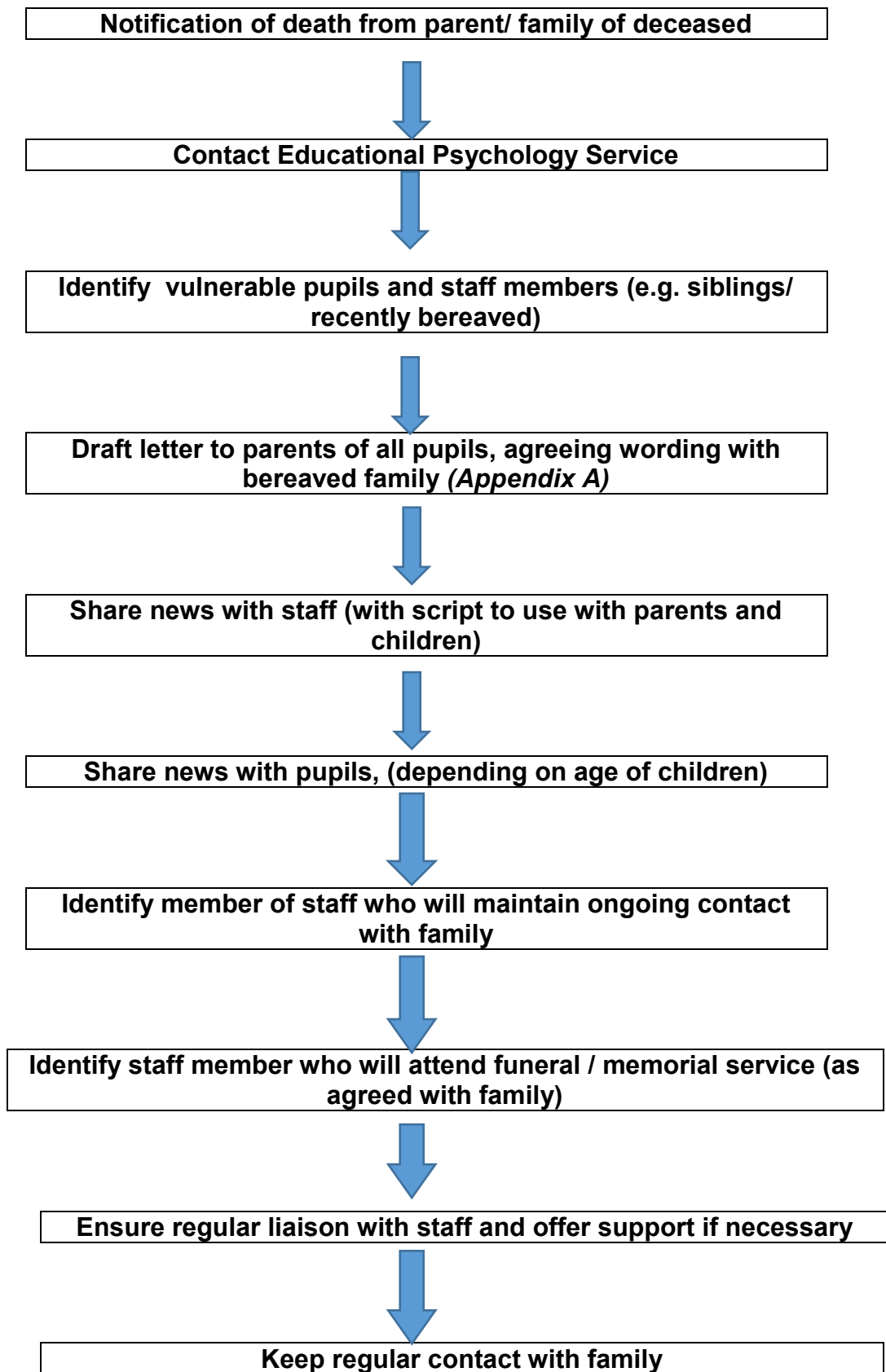
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**Nottinghamshire County Council:** *Coping with a School Emergency: A Practical Guide for Schools in Nottinghamshire (2008)*

<http://cms.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/externalversioncopingwithaschoolemergency.pdf>

## 2. Action Flowchart



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## **1. Introduction**

As Educational Psychologists, supporting schools and settings through a bereavement is an integral part of the work that we do. To this end, the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) aims to support schools and settings in preparing for and responding effectively to a bereavement in their community. We recognise that support around bereavement should be specific to the needs of the school or setting. In an Early Years setting children may experience bereavement or loss in their family, setting or wider community.

This document aims to support managers and leaders of school-attached Nursery, pre-school, independent and voluntary Early Years settings dealing with a bereavement in their setting. Guidance in this document should be considered alongside the information contained in the EPS documents '*Managing a Bereavement: Resource Pack*' and '*Managing a Critical Incident in an Early Years Setting*'.

## **2. Telling young children about a death in their school/ pre-school community**

*(including information taken from the Barnardo's guide 'Death: Helping Children Understand' (2008))*

Breaking the news of the death of a classmate, friend or staff member to children can be very difficult. Whether the death is sudden or anticipated, it is natural that parents, carers and staff want to protect children and themselves from greater distress. It is easy to assume that young children may not 'notice' the absence of a friend or relative. However, children need to be told about death and helped to understand the implications of their loss. It is important that staff are prepared by the setting leaders in advance of speaking to children to ensure that the messages shared about a bereavement are accurate, consistent and age appropriate.

Children's *understanding* of death is dependent on their age and stage of development. Some children in the setting may have had prior experience of a bereavement in their family (e.g. grandparent, friend or a family pet) whilst for some children this may be their first experience of the death of a familiar person.

- When children hear about a loss, particularly if it is somebody very close to them, ensure that they are not alone. In an Early Years setting it may be most appropriate that news of a bereavement is shared by their keyworker, or the adult they work with most frequently. For some children, it may be most appropriate to hear news from their parent or carer.
- In an Early Years setting it is likely that children at different ages and stages of development are grouped together for at least part of the day. It is therefore important that when planning to share the news of a bereavement setting leaders consider children according to their age and understanding, and share information based on what they can understand.

- Use simple and practical language. Where appropriate, link the explanation to what the child already understands about loss, such as the loss of a pet, change of Nursery or death of a family member.
- Depending on the ages of the children in the setting, don't be afraid to introduce the words 'dead'/'dying'. Using correct language in an age-appropriate way is less likely to lead to misunderstandings later. Introduce the idea that when people die this means that their bodies no longer work. They no longer need to eat and sleep and they no longer feel any pain.
- Be careful about using phrases like 'she has gone to sleep', 'gone away' or 'we lost Grandad'. Children may get confused by these terms and our everyday use of them. Young children may also become fearful that they too will 'go away' when they or a family member goes to sleep.
- In the absence of information, children may make up their own stories about what has happened, which can sometimes be more frightening than the actual facts.
- Be prepared to repeat the story several times and answer repeated questions. This is how children make sense of what has happened. Continue to offer children reassurance and support in the days, weeks and months ahead as they make their own journey through the grieving process.
- Children need to know they can express their feelings in their own way. Children may be angry or withdrawn as they begin to make sense of the permanency of a bereavement.
- It is important that children know who they can talk to about the death. For example, encourage them to say who they think they might like to talk to when they are feeling sad. Assure them that it is ok to talk to friends, teachers and trusted adults.
- Due to their increased understanding/information about death, children may become more concerned about their own health and the health of other significant people in their lives. The death of someone close may make children feel insecure.
- Try to be open to the questions children might have from time to time. If you do not have the answer or need to speak to a parent first, it is ok to say *'I don't have an answer to that question right now, but maybe we will talk about it again.'*
- It is important that other parents are informed by setting leaders about the death of a child/ staff member in the setting. It is also important that the planned response is shared with parents so that all adults have a shared understanding of the information and messages being conveyed. (*Appendix A*)

### 3. Children's understanding of death

*(including information taken from Supporting Bereaved Pupils in Schools: SeeSaw's information pack for schools (200)*

Children's understanding of death will vary with their age and stage of development. Very young children and babies are not yet able to understand death in the same way an older child or adult understands death. A child's understanding of the loss of a significant person develops as the child gets older. Young children are unlikely to understand the finality of death.

- It is likely that young children will ask when the person who has died will return, or can be visited, and often react without emotion to the news that a significant person has died.
- Young children will be aware that someone significant (e.g. family member/classmate / friend) is missing from their lives.
- Young children will be sensitive to the emotional atmosphere around them and may be aware that adults around them are distressed, which in turn can be confusing for them.
- Young children may show signs of anger or sadness, but often only for short periods before escaping into play.
- Young children may use play to act out their understanding and experience around what has happened – children often use repeated play to make sense of life experiences.
- Young children may appear to transfer their attachment to another person quickly for security.
- Young children may appear to regress in terms of language and behaviour (e.g. appearing to 'lose' previously learned skills such as toilet training).
- Young children may ask the same question repeatedly to try and make sense of what has happened.
- Children of this age believe in magic and often link their own thoughts, actions and wishes to outcomes over which they have no control. If a child has been angry and wished somebody 'away', they may feel responsible and guilty about a death.
- Young children will have a strong need for consistency of routine, structure, affection and reassurance to help them feel safe.

#### 4. Children's reactions to bereavement

*(including information taken from Supporting Bereaved Pupils in Schools: SeeSaw's information pack for schools, Barnardo's guide 'Death: Helping Children Understand' (2008) and Winston's Wish)*

**Bereavement is what happens to us, grief is what we feel and mourning is what we do.**

Children of all ages, even very young children, can react to the loss of a familiar person. Children react to grief in a number of different ways. Some children will react immediately to a death; other children may demonstrate a delay in their reactions.

##### Factors affecting the way children grieve

- Their age, stage of development and understanding of life and death
- Relationship and degree of attachment to the person who has died
- Previous experience of illness, loss and death
- How and what they were told of the death
- Availability of support networks – at home and at school
- Religious beliefs and practices
- Ethnic and cultural background – specific belief system/rituals

##### 0-2 years

- Although very young children and infants may have no understanding of death, they are likely to experience this loss as a separation from a person they are attached to. Their response is around the loss of the person, and not their death in itself.
- In the case of the death of a parent or close family member, fear of separation can be activated through the physical and emotional absence of the familiar adult.

##### 3- 5 years

- Children will search for the missing parent/carer/classmate and repeatedly ask the same questions. At this stage, they tend not to see death as permanent but see it as reversible and temporary.
- They may often become confused by explanations and may need to be told repeatedly about the death.

- Children of this age often regard sleeping and death as being the same. The difference needs to be carefully explained.
- A return to earlier behaviour patterns such as temper tantrums, clinginess, wanting to be picked up and thumb sucking may be experienced by children experiencing loss.
- Experience of death at this age can undermine self-confidence and the child's world can become unreliable and insecure. Try to keep routines like mealtimes, playtimes and nap times as regular as possible.

## **5. Helping young children through grief**

*(including information taken from Supporting Bereaved Pupils in Schools: SeeSaw's information pack for schools, Barnardo's guide 'Death: Helping Children Understand' (2008) and Winston's Wish)*

Staff can do much simply by being their usual, caring selves and keeping Nursery routines as normal and familiar as possible.

- Consistency and normality provide a sense of security for bereaved children at a difficult time in their lives.
- Liaise with the family/ families involved to ensure consistency of language about the death.
- Be tolerant of any 'immature' or regressive behaviours, giving gentle encouragement to regain lost skills.
- Maintain contact with parents and be supportive of the bereaved adults in the child's life.
- Answer children's questions simply and honestly. Liaise with parents if you have any concerns around what a child is saying or believing.
- Allow children the space to speak about what has happened if they so wish. Encourage them to talk about the things they remember about the person who has died.
- Playing, drawing and talking about what has happened and exploring any worries or feelings will help children to begin to integrate their loss into their lives. This should happen as and when the child(ren) feel ready to do so. Access to age-appropriate stories about death can also help their understanding.
- Where a child from the setting has died, keep the child's work, photo, up in school for a while to allow other pupils to talk about their friend and remember. Prepare them before you take things down.



- Any photos, examples of work, classmate's memories, etc., could be collected into a classbook. Some children may need to use this for some time as they come to understand what has happened. Eventually the book can be passed onto the family if they would like it.

## **6. Supporting a young child through a family bereavement**

*(Including information taken from Supporting Bereaved Pupils in Schools: SeeSaw's information pack for schools (2008))*

- Identify a link person who will liaise with the bereaved family. This will usually be the setting leader (manager, assistant manager, headteacher, SENCo.)
- Acknowledge the death with the family by phone, card, or visit. It is important for young children to know that the adults in their Nursery are 'keeping them in mind' when they are not physically present at Nursery.
- Good consistent nurturing will help meet the child's needs. Keeping to routines of feeding and sleeping is very important for babies and very young children and will help them feel secure at an uncertain time.
- A member of staff should be nominated to offer ongoing monitoring and support to the pupil and family.
- Ensure all staff in the setting are aware of the bereavement and the possible effects of the pupil/pupils, their behaviour and their learning, so that appropriate support can be offered if/when necessary.
- Consider the appropriateness of a staff presence at the funeral. This is best discussed and agreed in advance with the family. Children often appreciate the presence of familiar staff as an acknowledgement of the importance of what has happened in their lives.
- Discuss in advance with parents/carers how annual occasions (Mother's Day, Father's Day) will be marked in the setting. Make a note of significant dates which may affect the pupil (birthdays, anniversaries).
- Although a child attending an Early Years setting is not yet at an age where school attendance is compulsory, it is worth monitoring attendance as absence may indicate that the pupil or family are struggling.
- Be alert to the fact that as the child matures and develops, their understanding of their bereavement will in turn change too. Reaction to bereavement may present themselves months or years after the event, and it may be difficult for staff to link present day behaviour with a past bereavement.

## **7. Supporting a young child's return to their Early Years Setting**

*(Including information taken from Supporting Bereaved Pupils in Schools: SeeSaw's information pack for schools (2008)*

It is not unusual for a bereaved child to take time away from Nursery during the early stage of bereavement. For young children, it is not unusual to experience a degree of separation anxiety from parent or carer upon return to their Early Years setting following a bereavement.

- Liaise with parents/carers in advance of return to Nursery (e.g. home visit, telephone call). Be aware that grief can impact on usual family routines (e.g. mealtimes, bathtime, bedtime). Work with the family to gain an understanding of how the child's life has been during their absence from Nursery. Help the child to settle back to the routines of Nursery.
- Ensure staff are familiar with the usual grief process, and be alert to changes in behaviour.

## **8. Talking to parents**

*(including information from EPS guidance for schools Managing a Bereavement: Resource Pack and SeeSaw's Learning Disability Pack)*

The death of a pupil is one of the most difficult things a school or Early Years setting can face. Speaking to parents following the death of a child can sometimes be a daunting task for staff, and it is not unusual to feel overwhelmed by the task. Staff often worry about what to say to a parent who has experienced a significant bereavement. They are wary of adding to distress. When the death of a Nursery child has occurred staff are understandably dealing with their own strong emotions. However, it is important to acknowledge the enormity of the loss that the family are facing.

- Setting leaders should carefully consider their emotional robustness with regard to talking to parents. If in doubt, it may be useful to discuss this out with another colleague. If a staff member has themselves experienced a significant loss or bereavement in their lives this may be a particularly difficult time for them.
- Allow your genuine concern and care for the family to show. Tell them you are sorry about what has happened to their child, and the pain they are feeling.
- Allow parents to express as much grief as they need to at that moment and are willing to share.

- Talk about their child using their child's name, and mention the special and endearing qualities the child had. Don't avoid mentioning the child's name out of fear of reminding them of their pain.
- Encourage parents to be patient with themselves, and not expect too much of themselves at this time.
- *Don't* let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out to a bereaved parent.
- *Don't* avoid them because you are uncomfortable (being avoided adds to an already painful experience) or change the subject when they mention their child.
- *Don't* point out that at least they have other children (children cannot replace each other).
- *Don't* say that they can always have another child (even if they wanted to, and could, another child could never replace the child they have lost).
- Maintain a link with the family. Remember the first anniversary and birthday of the child. Invite the parents to maintain a link with the Nursery community, by extending invitations to group events such as plays, assemblies etc.
- Ask the family if they would like to keep the child's work and learning profile. They may say no at first and then regret their decision so if it is possible work should be kept safely for them in case they change their mind.

## **9. Cultural understandings of death**

*(Faith perspectives and customs associated with death published by Bedfordshire County Council)*

It is helpful when speaking to parents and family to be mindful of the family's religious preferences, if any. Different religions have specific customs associated with death. Where a particular religious tradition is not referenced below, staff are encouraged to seek information via the internet, or their local library.

### *Buddhism*

In common with most Eastern religions, Buddhism holds the concept of rebirth. Buddhists believe that when a person dies, the Karma (the accumulated effect of a person's actions) that a person has developed in this life carries on having its effects. Buddhist funerals are dignified but not sad events. The body is usually cremated and the ashes scattered or buried. A tree may be planted where a person's remains are scattered. When someone dies the relative often gives gifts to the monks. They ask that the merit they gain from doing this should be shared with the person who has died. Buddhists always look after graves very carefully. The tree being planted shows the earth bringing forth

new life. This is because of the belief that humans are part of a cycle of life and death. Buddhists do not believe in God, so any remembrance should make no reference to a deity.

### Christianity

Christians believe in life after death, which they base on the resurrection of Jesus and his promise of eternal life. Different Christian denominations have their own form of ceremony, although the base beliefs and practice are held in common. The bodies may be cremated or buried. If a person has an association with a particular church, the family and congregation may hold a funeral service there, before going on to the cemetery or crematorium. The funeral service may have a celebration of life approach which can be flexible in content or follow a set pattern.

### Hinduism

Hindus believe in reincarnation. The basis of this is the belief that it is the ultimate desire of each soul to return to the Supreme Spirit some day. To do so it must be clean, and the purification needed is hard to achieve in one lifetime. So each soul has to be born over and over again, gradually improving itself each lifetime until it is finally ready to return to its creator.

Adult Hindus must be cremated, not buried, but infants and young children may be buried and it is useful for this to be done as soon as possible, preferably the same day. Traditionally, the eldest son has the responsibility for making the funeral arrangements. White clothing is worn as a sign of mourning.

### Islam

The Islamic faith places a great deal of significance on death and the funeral rites of deceased Muslims. Muslims believe the soul leaves at the point of death and that the body does not belong to the individual but to God. Muslims prefer the body to be buried within twenty four hours of death.

### Judaism

The Jewish Scriptures make little reference to the afterlife. Jews believe that God will reward them by allowing them to enter into his presence or punish them by making them go through a cleansing process first. All last rites and funeral arrangements are carried out by the Chevra Kaddisha (holy society). Note that it is considered disrespectful to delay a burial which should take place within twenty-four hours of death, other than in exceptional circumstances.

### Secular Humanism

Secular Humanists value human life and personality but do not believe in God or an afterlife. Humanist funerals remember and honour the person who has died, while facing the finality of death with courage.

## Sikhism

Considerations similar to those for Hindus apply. Sikh dead are cremated rather than buried and the ceremony should take place as soon as practicable. Sensitivity and respect for the wishes of the deceased relative as far as possible should be practised as always.

## **10. Support for staff**

- Setting leaders should endeavour to 'check in' with staff on a regular basis, but especially by the end of the first days following the death.
- Ensure an appropriate support network is in place for all staff, including leaders and managers.
- Ensure staff know where to access professional support if necessary.

## **11. Training**

School attached Nurseries can access information around bereavement and dealing with a critical incident via their school's SENCo and link Educational Psychologist. Pre-School, Voluntary and Independent settings can access information via SFSS Early Years team. Early Years settings should consider preparing staff in advance of a bereavement through the usual Continuous Professional Development cycle for the setting.

## **12. Resources**

*(National organisations offering bereavement support and advice)*

- **Child Bereavement Trust UK** (tel: 01494 568900, [www.childbereavementuk.org](http://www.childbereavementuk.org)) – a resource for anyone who is in contact with bereaved children, parents, schools, nurses etc. Directory of accessible specialist bereavement support services for children.
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** (tel: 01159 244404, [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)) - Cruse can provide someone to talk to and information on many aspects of bereavement including practical and financial matters, advice about children and young people.
- **Childhood Bereavement Network** (tel: 0207 8436309, [www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk](http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk)) - Resource for anyone who is in contact with bereaved children, parents, schools, nurses etc. Directory of accessible specialist bereavement support services for children

- **Nottingham Counselling Service** (tel: 01159 501743)
- **SeeSaw** (tel: 01865 744 768 [www.seesaw.org.uk](http://www.seesaw.org.uk))
- **Winston's Wish: The Charity for Bereaved Children** (tel: 08452 030405, [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk))

### **Books**

- *Missing Mummy* by Rebecca Cox. Available via Child Bereavement UK
- *Is Daddy Coming Back in a Minute?* By Alex Barber and Elke Barber. Available via Child Bereavement UK
- *Goodbye Mousie* by Robie H Harris. Available via Amazon UK
- *I Miss You* by Pat Thomas. Available via Amazon UK

### 13. Appendix A

## SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS

**Dear parent/carer,**

I am very sorry to have to tell you of that ..... died yesterday.

As you may know she had been ill for some time and yesterday she was taken to hospital where she died peacefully with her family by her bedside.

We have been in touch with .....’s parents who wanted her friends to know what had happened. Mrs.....has therefore told the class today of .....’s death and has taken time to answer some of their questions.

We will be having a ‘circle time’ in our Nursery later this week where we will be sharing our memories of..... and talking about what she meant to us all.

When someone dies, friends and family often experience a number of mixed emotions and you may find that your child will be upset, confused, anxious or fearful about what has happened. The staff will be offering support to the children in school but you need to be aware that their feelings of grief may also be expressed at home.

Advice about supporting a grieving child can be found on >>>(various websites) or you can contact the Nursery office for an information sheet.

If you have any particular concerns about your child please do talk to the class teacher/ room leader/ setting leader.

Yours sincerely,