



## Bereavement Policy

### 1. Introduction

The main aim of this policy is to provide a framework for all staff, both teaching and nonteaching, to give guidance on how to deal sensitively and compassionately in difficult and upsetting circumstances.

### 2. Aims

At FACT Schools we aim to meet the needs of all children and staff within a community context. When home circumstances are changed because of a death in the family and all around is 'different', our school aims to be a place that both child and family can rely on, and gain some much needed support.

If the death is of a child or member of staff, the whole school community will work together; with outside agencies as appropriate, to support each other.

### 3. Procedures

Within school we work in partnership with parents. When children join the school, we find out as much as possible about every child to tailor the academic, social and emotional teaching in school to match their needs. Parents are encouraged to make teachers aware of any previous changes that might have profoundly affected their child (divorce, bereavement, moving, new babies etc). If there has been bereavement, information on what the child was told (in terms of religious beliefs etc.) should be sought, in order that the school does not say anything that could confuse or upset the child or family.

#### **a. Family Bereavement**

When school is informed of bereavement or loss the following action should be considered:

- The family should be contacted for appropriate support. (See Appendix 1 for addresses and relevant telephone help lines)
- The family should be asked how much and what the child already knows and how they have been involved.
- It should be explained to the family how the school can be involved to support the child and family with the pastoral and counselling support teams.
- The importance of working together and liaison will be explained – both parties assessing any changes in behaviour. (Eating and sleeping patterns may change or behaviour in school may deteriorate or the child becomes withdrawn.)
- Involve outside agencies as appropriate e.g. the school nurse, Educational Psychology Service, Child Bereavement UK.

For a member of staff experiencing close family bereavement, absence will be arranged for attendance at a funeral and appropriate time off in line with the FACT Leave of Absence Policy. Additional time may be given through sick leave as appropriate.

#### **b. Death of a child or member of staff**

When the school is informed of the death of a child or member of staff, the following action should be considered;

- Discussion should take place with the family and their wishes taken into account before decisions are taken on how and what to tell the children in school.
- Counselling should be available if necessary e.g. in cases of sudden or violent death (outside agencies should be involved with this e.g. Educational Psychology Service).
- The school may be closed, or as many people as possible released to attend a funeral or memorial services should it be appropriate and they wish to do so.
- Staff and children should be supported throughout the grieving period; anyone displaying signs of stress should be offered appropriate support.
- Pupils and staff may express a wish to attend, or take part in the service, but they should only do so with the prior agreement of the deceased's family, relatives or next of kin, as well as the agreement of their own parents/carers.
- The class most affected might like to write, draw or record their thoughts and feelings; these could then be passed to the bereaved family.
- After the service, staff and pupils should be encouraged to meet and express their thoughts and feelings as such services are important in the grieving process.

#### **c. Terminally Ill Pupils/Staff**

- In the event of a child or member of staff becoming terminally ill, their wishes and those of their parents/guardians/next-of-kin should always be respected.
- Should the child wish to attend school, the class teacher may need to inform the class of the child's condition.
- Occasionally, the child may wish to talk to their fellow classmates about their predicament themselves. Honesty about death and dying may be the best line of approach. Sometimes there is just no other way.

#### **d. Return to School (see Appendix 3)**

- For the bereaved child or member of staff, returning to school may be traumatic.
- Where there has been a close family bereavement, in most cases everyone (teaching, support staff, volunteers if appropriate and pupils) should be made aware of the situation before the pupil returns (providing the parents/guardians of the bereaved child agree)
- Staff should show appropriate compassion and allow expression to those suffering grief.
- Teachers should try to foster an environment that is compassionate, yet disciplined.
- Family life at this traumatic time, can be particularly distressing, routines upset, relationships strained, the future uncertain. For this reason, school routines should be kept as normal as possible in order to provide a respite.
- Staff should be aware of anniversaries as this can spark a revival of feelings of bereavement.
- Staff might keep an eye on those particularly affected by the death of a close associate.

### **e. Talking to the Bereaved Pupil**

- Try to be available to listen and support if possible, arrange a one-to-one session with the pastoral team or school counsellor as soon as possible after the pupil returns to school
- Be calm and show them that you are listening and understanding by occasionally repeating what they have said and by acknowledging their emotions.
- If people feel like crying they should cry – crying is not a sign of weakness, but often a sign of deep feeling.
- Beware of using platitudes eg “I know how you feel”, (young people may feel offended that you presume how they feel)

#### **Do**

- Let the child know that you genuinely care
- Make time to be available and listen
- Accept all that the child is saying
- Allow them to express their feelings their way
- Let them know their feelings are normal
- Let them know that it is OK to cry
- Talk honestly and share your feelings
- Be honest
- Have eye contact
- Have appropriate physical contact
- Let them know that it is not their fault
- Be aware of the home situation

#### **Don't**

- Stop the child talking
- Tell them how they should or should not feel
- Avoid contact
- Change the subject
- Deny your pain and feelings
- Point out things for which they should be grateful
- Be frightened of sharing your own feelings

## Appendix 1

Useful Websites for dealing with loss and bereavement in the school community:

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

[www.childbereavement.org.uk](http://www.childbereavement.org.uk)

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Useful telephone numbers and addresses:

- Winston's Wish Family Line - 0845 2030405 – national helpline offering guidance, information and support to anyone caring for a bereaved child, including professionals and family members
- Childhood Bereavement Network - 020 7843 6309 – a network of child bereavement services
- CRUSE Bereavement Care (0870) 167 1677 [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

## Appendix 2

Books dealing with death and loss

Beyond the Rough Rock - Supporting a Child who has been Bereaved through Suicide – Julie Stokes, Diana Crossley

As Big As It Gets - Supporting a Child when Someone in their Family is Seriously Ill – Julie Stokes, Diana Crossley

The Secret C - Straight Talking about Cancer - Julie Stokes, Diana Crossley

I Miss You - First Look at Death - Pat Thomson

Grandpa- John Burningham

Always and Forever – Alan Durant

The Huge Bag of Worries – Virginia Ironside

What on Earth Do you Do When Someone Dies? – Trevor Romain

Badger's Parting Gifts- Susan Varley

Saying Goodbye to Daddy – Judith Vigna

Waterbugs and Dragonflies – Explaining Death to Young Children

## Appendix 3

### Support and Further Suggestions for Teachers

Parents and carers often feel that teachers are experts on their children. They may turn to the school for advice and information, especially on matters of bereavement.

It is important to remember that the family, friends and the immediate community often best support those suffering from bereavement, as is the case with other stressful life events. Teachers need not be experts on the subject but they do need to use sensitivity and their skills in understanding children's development and emotional needs.

The following are some points that may be helpful to bear in mind when talking to parents and carers:

- A death will disrupt the family for many months; in fact the family will never be the same again. Family members are grieving, relationships alter, and members may take on new roles. Sometimes there is a change of carer, house or school, all of which add to the disruption and distress experienced by the child. To support the child it is helpful to minimise, if possible, changes and disruptions in their normal daily routine and life in school.
- Bereaved family members may emotionally and physically withdraw from the child, to protect themselves from more distress. Some adults will deny the bereaved child is grieving, as it will be too distressing for them to acknowledge the child's pain. This may cause distress and confusion, causing grief reactions of anger, withdrawal or psychosomatic behaviours such as headaches, stomach-ache or sickness.
- The bereaved child may regress in behaviour, becoming clingy, difficult or withdrawn. His/her schoolwork may suffer. These changes will be partly due to grief but also to the disruption and changes within the family, causing the child to feel confused and unsafe.
- The child may feel resentment, jealousy or guilt towards the dead person or child. The expression of this verbally can cause the remaining family members distress and shock. Parents and carers need to know this is normal and will decrease as the child and the family become more stable and settled.
- Parents and carers need to be informed of the benefits that a child gains in being involved in the ceremonies and rituals that follow death. An explanation as to how mourning practices help children to express their feelings and come to terms with and accept the reality of their loss can be very beneficial.
- Teachers should remember that parents and carers will often use them as role models, counsellors or extended family; looking to them for support for themselves as well as finding appropriate ways of supporting and talking with their children.
- Teachers may require their own support structures. Supporting bereaved families, whilst rewarding can be emotionally draining.

Appendix 4 sets out the developmental stages relating to children's understanding of death.

### Early Years Education – aged 3 to 5 – Preschool and Reception

When a child this young experiences the death of someone important, it is important they are helped to know about the person as an integral part of their history. Young children often ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to understand their loss. They are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that our explanations aren't good enough. Reading books on death and loss, playing, drawing and giving them opportunities to identify and talk about worries and feelings will all help them deal with the loss.

At this age, they may not understand that death is permanent or that it happens to every living thing. A 4-year old may be able to tell others confidently that 'my daddy's dead' and may even be able to explain how 'he was hit by a car and he died'. However, the next sentence may be: 'I hope he'll be back before my birthday' or 'He's picking me up tonight'. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat breathe and keep warm. It is important to give them simple, factual information and tell them that once someone has died, their body stops working so they don't feel pain anymore and they don't feel hot or cold and they don't need to eat or drink anything.

Children's thoughts are concrete and characterised by "magical thinking". They may struggle to understand abstract concepts (such as heaven) or roundabout ways of explaining death (e.g. 'gone to sleep'). Children may believe it was something they said or did that caused the death or they may believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the person back. They need to be reassured that the death was not their fault and gently reminded that the person will not come back. By using concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and giving specific explanations about why the person died can help.

It is important to maintain a routine as normal as possible for the child. It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to younger behaviours such as separation anxiety, incontinence, and use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Being tolerant and managing the separation will be helpful for the child and the family. In time, it is most likely these earlier behaviour patterns will disappear once 'new normal' family routines are established.

### Key Stage 1 – Ages 5 to 7 – Years 1 and 2

Children of this age are beginning to understand that death is permanent; however, some confusion may still stand. When first told of the death, younger children may be mainly concerned with the 'when' and 'where' of the death. They may express concerns about their own future such as: 'What will happen to me? Who will meet me after school? Will I still go to Cubs?' Giving reassurance about everyday activities and arrangements continuing as normal, or clear explanations about alternative arrangements, will be helpful for the child.

Children may become clingy or more reluctant to see parents and carers leave. There may be a need to stick close to their parent to protect them from the mysterious occurrence that made their dad disappear or at least to be with them if it happens again. Children at this stage may complain of a sore tummy, headaches or just generally not feeling well. These are what we call 'somatic' complaints, where unexpressed feelings and emotions can lead to physical symptoms or discomfort. Somatic complaints are normal, but it is important that routines are maintained while gently

acknowledging when someone important dies we feel things like sadness and worry in our bodies too.

They can also feel that in some way they were responsible for the death, e.g. 'I was angry with him and shouted at him when he left for work because he wouldn't fix my bike. I refused to give him a hug. And then he never came home again. It's my fault.' It can be worth saying something like: 'You do know, don't you, that nothing you said or did made this happen?'

### Key Stage 2 – Ages 7 to 11 – Years 3, 4, 5 and 6

As children begin to understand more about death and dying, a death in the family may make them anxious about the health and safety of surviving members of the family. They may feel very responsible for their parent(s) and younger siblings and feel the need to keep a close eye on their safety.

Children this age can find it difficult to talk about their bereavement and express their feelings behaviourally, such as withdrawing from others or showing increased aggression. They may experience difficulties in their interactions with their peers, particularly as 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 avoid clichés like "You're being so brave" as children can interpret this as they should not share their feelings. They may need a safe space or quiet area away from peers to calm down or express their emotions with an adult.

Children of this age also show curiosity about issues such as what a dead body looks like and what happens to a body after a person has been dead for some time. This curiosity is natural and they will benefit from clear, factual explanations. Children can also think of death as something spooky, like a zombie, or a spirit that comes to get you. Normalising feelings, talking about or drawing specific worries and sharing bad dreams can be reassuring, giving children skills and confidence to feel more in charge of them.

By the age of 10, children will usually have all of the bits of the jigsaw puzzle of understanding. They will even understand that they are able to cause their own death. They will appreciate clear and detailed information – beyond 'when', 'where' and 'how' the death happened, they will be interested in 'why'.