‘Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve’ (Wolfelt, 1996)

Working with children and young people who are experiencing loss and grief is an enormous privilege and a responsibility. Whilst it is important that we take that responsibility seriously, we must also hold it lightly, accepting that it is not our job to ‘cure’ the child or the situation, and that there are no hard and fast rules. What is key is that we allow ourselves to be guided by the child or young person who is grieving, the only expert in how they are feeling.

Wolfelt uses the helpful metaphor of gardening – where a natural process of growth and change is protected and nurtured by those that care. He suggests that ‘grief gardeners’ know that grief is organic, complex but perfectly natural and necessary. As gardeners we are called to watch and learn as well as to create conditions that allow our companion to mourn. The process of accompanying a child or young person in their grief journey involves patience, courage and flexibility as they flit nimbly between moments of deep pain, times of fun and laughter, and philosophical depth and pragmatic realism as they explore their assumptions about life and its meaning and purpose.
Grief, Bereavement and Loss

The death of a sibling can be particularly traumatic for children not only because they are watching their parents grieve, but also because sibling relationships are often complex with very strong feelings of both love and ambivalence. Children often express confusion caused by feelings of fear, guilt and relief. The death of a parent can also result in numerous other losses like changes in financial status, house and school moves. These create a cumulative effect that can overwhelm a child or young person.

The process of grief will be affected by many factors including:

1. 'Who' is it that the bereaved person has lost? These may include: family member, friend, influential adult, a teacher.
2. 'How' a life ends influences the grief of those bereaved through the death. These may include: anticipated through illness/genes/genetic disorder etc, sudden events, accident, suicide, through ill-intent (murder), unfortunate circumstances – lightning / storm / building collapse etc.
3. The personal history of the bereaved person will influence how they grieve. These may include: past and current mental and emotional health, past bereavements, physical health, additional educational needs, past relationships with the person who has died.
4. Help and support available at the time of death and following it. This may include: availability and access to wider family, access and availability of support groups – church / charities / school / university etc.
5. 'What' is it that the bereaved person has lost? This may include: Future plans – marriage / house move etc, 'Complicated' – eg losing status / home / main source of support.

Assumptions to avoid:

- **Bereavement is what happens to you; grief is what you feel; mourning is what you do.** Sometimes the words grief and mourning are used interchangeably but there is an essential difference. Grief is the internal experience of thoughts and feelings caused by the loss of someone or something. Mourning is the external expression of that grieving. For children and young people mourning is more often expressed through actions than words, and can look very different from the mourning of adults.

- **Grief can be resolved** – we are forever changed by the loss we have experienced. This doesn't mean that we have to remain stunted and damaged by the experience, but attempts to return things to the way they were will only end in frustration and failure to recognize the growth brought about by the process of mourning and lament.

- **You must be strong** – sometimes well-meaning adults seeking to give children and young people purpose in the new order, say things like 'you must be strong for your mother' or 'it's your job to look after your siblings now'.

- **You have a right not to hurt** – Because of the wonders of modern medicine children in the Western world are rarely exposed to the denigrating, grinding reality of sickness and disease. Our society has come to believe that we have a right to eternal youth lived with no pain, so when pain strikes we do everything we can to avoid it. The Bible is full of lament, helping us to recognize that pain and death are part of life,
not separate from it.

- **You can get over grief** – no one ever totally completes the mourning process. It is perhaps more helpful to think of grief as a journey with no end point. Quite often another ‘cycle’ is experienced at key points throughout the child’s growth into adulthood, particularly celebratory events and ‘firsts’.

- **They are playing so they don’t care** – play is the work of the child and the space where they are able to process their thoughts and feelings. If the loss or death is sudden, then quite often a child may take some time to react as they initially protect themselves from the painful reality.

Regardless of a child's cognitive ability or emotional and social intelligence, all children still are able to love and experience grief. For many their reaction to minor losses brought about by change is evidence of how deeply they feel. Many children and young people with additional needs develop very strong emotional attachments to significant people in their lives, it is therefore essential to keep them as informed as possible even if this requires a lot of repetition and patience as they process the feelings and emotions in their own way.

**Basic Principles to practice**

- The child is the expert but might not know it. Be patient. Too many questions might actually stop the child expressing what is really going on for them.

- Watch for non-verbal clues (facial expressions, body language, repeated themes in play or conversation) to what the child is experiencing and invitations to engage with that.

- Take time to understand the relationship the child had with the person who has died – don’t assume that kinship determine the size of the grief. Consider what level of attachment there was, and what function the relationship serves for the child, as well as whether there is evidence of ambivalence. The age of the person who died is also going to have an impact on how the child perceives the ‘natural order’ of the loss.

- Keep the child informed of the progress towards loss or death. Whilst we might think we are protecting them from pain, a sudden loss or death can be harder for the child to cope with, and the knowledge that other people knew and didn't tell them can lead to feelings of betrayal.

**How schools can help in supporting bereaved children**

Schools, just by carrying on with their usual day to day activities, can do a huge amount to support a grieving child. Schools can offer:

**Normality**

For a child, or young person, whose life has been turned upside down, the routines of school life can give a sense of normality. Everything else may have fallen apart but school and the people within it are still there, offering a sense of security and continuity.

**Relief from grief**

For young children and adolescents, school can give relief from an emotionally charged atmosphere at home. They may feel overwhelmed by a grieving family. There may be a constant stream of visitors expressing their own grief. Children and young people can find this difficult to deal with.
An outlet for grief

When a parent or sibling has died, children and young people can try to spare their surviving parent by hiding their own grief and appearing to be OK. School is often seen as somewhere safe to express this grief.

A listening ear

Children can be overlooked by family members struggling to deal with their own grief. For a child who wishes to, school staff can provide an opportunity to talk about what has happened with a familiar and trusted adult in relative peace and calm.

The opportunity to be a child

Even when deeply sad, children still need to be children. Loss and grief are very grown up experiences. School offers the chance to play, laugh, sing and generally just be a child without feeling guilty.

General Support

By keeping in contact with home, schools can discuss concerns but equally important, successes. The family or carers will find this reassuring. Grieving children and young people can display altered behaviours in different situations. Good communication with home will help school be aware of this and provide a more realistic picture of how the child is coping.

Resources

Having in school a selection of resources on the subject can be helpful. Stories are a wonderful way to gently introduce young children to the concept of death. Novels and poems offer young people a chance to learn through reading, listening and discussion.

Children’s understanding and response to death

0-2 Years

Understanding of death

- May become aware of the person not being there in the normal routines of life

Some possible grief reactions to death

- Show signs of anxiety or distress
- Searching behaviour for the missing person

Possible Ways of helping a child

- Maintain daily routines
- Parent/carer maintain warm loving relationship with child

3-6 Years (Early Years and Key Stage 1)
Understanding of death

- Young children may be beginning to understand the concept of death, but do not appreciate its finality.
- Some may expect the dead person to reappear – “shall we dig granny up now?”
- They think in literal and concrete terms and so will be confused by euphemisms for death such as “gone away” or “gone to sleep”.
- Repeated explanations of what has happened may be required.

Some possible grief reactions to death

- Responses are varied.
- Outward signs are not always evident, but this doesn't mean that the child isn't grieving.
- May have difficulty in expressing feelings in words.
- They may yearn for the dead person, demonstrating anger and protest when they don't return.
- They may feel that it was partly their fault.
- Their behaviour may regress – becoming clingy and demanding more attention.
- Child might become frightened of going to sleep alone or in the dark.
- Babyish language, temper tantrums and bed-wetting may also increase.
- They are prone to fantasize at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something scarier than reality.
- When first told, they may not understand and may ask inappropriate questions

Possible Ways of helping a child

- Gently repeat the fact that the dead person will not return
- Maintain daily routines
- Maintain boundaries
- Be patient with ‘accidents’
- Answer his/her questions honestly
- Do not protect him/her ‘because he/she doesn't understand’

7-10 Years (Key Stage 2)
Most children realise that dead people are different from those that are alive, that they do not feel, they cannot hear, see, smell or speak and they do not need to eat or drink.

- By seven years of age the majority of children accept that death is permanent and that it can happen to anyone.
- They are aware that death is permanent and that the dead person won't return.
- They know that death can come about through illness or an accident.
- They are more able to express their thoughts and feelings but may conceal them and outwardly appear unaffected.
- They need to be given an opportunity to ask questions and to be given as much information as possible to allow them to adjust.
- They may at times use ‘magical’ thinking (the dead person watching or talking to them) to create stories around the bereavement.
- They are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.
- They begin to be aware of the feelings of others and to show empathy to those also affected by the loss.

Some possible grief reactions to death

- They can show many of the grief reactions of younger children; crying, bed wetting, eating and sleeping problems.
- They may become very irritable or aggressive towards other children and adults, or may become clingy.
- They may become fearful that the same thing might happen to them or others close to them and this could result in them not wanting to leave home or be apart from remaining family members.
- They may develop psychosomatic illnesses; headaches, feeling sick.
- School attendance may be disrupted.
- Self-esteem and self-confidence may be affected.
- Social peer pressures may limit their ability to express their feelings.
- They may appear as though everything is fine – brave and in control.
- May become preoccupied with death.

Possible Ways of helping a child

- Give matter of fact information about manner of death and demonstrate the child was in no way responsible.
- Provide opportunities for the child to talk with parents or other adults and give permission for the expression of feelings through variety of means.
- Maintain daily routines.
Maintain boundaries.

- Make sure school knows as much as possible. Try to find out how the issue is being handled.

11+ (Upper Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 & 4)

Understanding of death

- At this age children’s understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts.

- The need to know details continues and may seek answers to very specific questions.

- The struggle for independence at this age may cause bereaved teenagers to challenge the beliefs and expectations of others as to how they should be feeling or behaving.

- Death increases anxieties about the future. They may question the meaning of life and experience depression.

- Teenagers may find it easier to discuss their feelings with a sympathetic friend or adult than close family member.

- They may be having difficulty coming to terms with their own mortality and that of those close to them and cope by refusing to contemplate the possibility of death by experimenting with risk taking behaviour.

Some possible grief reactions to death

- Withdrawal, sadness, loneliness, depression.

- Anger and rejection.

- Joking, sarcasm.

- Dependence or regressing to younger age.

- Insecurity, low self-esteem.

- Bullying or being bullied

- Self-harm, eating disorders

- Ways of helping your child

Possible Ways of helping a child

- Maintain daily routines

- Ensure boundaries

- Beware of loading adult responsibilities on an adolescent

- Support outside the family can be important
Breaking sad news to the whole school community

Breaking sad news about the death of someone from the school community is not easy. The following guidelines are given so that you can begin to decide on your personal way of letting others know.

**On being told of a death or anticipated death of a pupil, pupil’s parent or member of staff**

- Identify the most appropriate person to liaise between home and school and within school
- Establish the facts and plan to inform key people (see below)
  - Consider keeping a journal/note book to log key information over the weeks that follow
- Communicate with parent/s siblings if possible
  - Consider the family’s wishes. What information they want to be conveyed and when?
- Agree what and when information is to be given to the rest of the school community – pupils, parents (liaise with other school/s that might be affected)

**Key people to contact may include:**

- Staff, Chair of Governors, MAT CEO, Clergy, School Chaplain.
  - Ideally at a meeting. In school holidays contact key staff on a need-to-know basis. Don't forget absent staff, non-teaching staff, governors as appropriate
- Pupils
  - Small groups, tutor sessions, assemblies, consider special attention for SEN pupils, those who have a close relationship with the deceased – give children a break time following the announcement (have extra staff outside if possible)
  - Consider carefully the message, age-appropriateness & language used: be as factual and honest as possible – give opportunity for questions to be asked
- Parents/Carers
  - Consider a letter home, liaising with family
- Media
  - Head - possibly together with Chair of Governors - to provide a statement *if necessary*. Seek advice from HR provider including MAT CEO
Ideas for Collective Worship and Memorial

One of the difficult outcomes of the measures to reduce the spread of coronavirus is the restrictions around funerals. It is really important that family members (and in particular children and young people) who are unable to attend, are given the opportunity to mark the loss and bereavement with a ritual. Below are some ideas that could be used when the school community is gathered or at home to help children and young people acknowledge the death or loss they and mourn.

Possible Liturgical structure for memorial gatherings

**GATHER**

We gather here today to think about (name(s)). To celebrate their life (lives) and acknowledge how sad it is that they are no longer with us.

We thank God (We give thanks for) for the gift of (name(s)) and for his love for us (the love that surrounds us) as we share together in our grief and sorrow.

**ENGAGE**

Lamentations 3:12-25

Psalm 139: 7-16

Psalm 23

A Dreadful Day or Goodbye at Last from the Lion Storyteller Bible

**RESPOND**

Prayer

Heavenly father, thank you for (name(s)) and all that they meant to us.

(If appropriate encourage people to share short sentences of what they are thankful for, (e.g. her big smile, his football skills, etc.)

The Bible says you love all that you have made, and whilst we might not ever understand why bad things happen, we ask that we will know your comfort and peace in the midst of our sadness.

Amen
Choose one of the activities below

**Memorial Activities**

**Bottles of Tears**

The King and Poet David understood from his own experience that life can sometimes be really hard and it can feel like we are all alone. In the poems he wrote, collected in the book of Psalms, he often has a good old moan before remembering what he believes about who God is and how he looks after him. In Psalm 56 he demonstrates his belief that God is right by his side when he is sad and upset by saying that God has collected all his tears in a bottle.

It is ok to cry, tears are our body's natural reaction to both sadness and joy, but it is comforting to think that God remembers all the times that they fall.

Create a symbol of this comforting image by slowly filling a bottle with water. If you are doing this at home as a family you could use a pipette or turkey baster. If you are doing this in school then use small cups and a larger bottle with a wide neck. Give everyone an opportunity to put a drop or cup of water into the bottle, and as they do so to think of something special about the person you are remembering. You can add glitter and sequins to the water if you wish, and then when the bottle is sealed shaking the bottle can remind people of the collection of memories of that person and the joy and sadness they bring.

**Timeline**

Create a timeline covering the key events of the lifetime of the person they are grieving (e.g. for an adult - birth, school, wedding, children, job, first car, etc. For a child – birth, first steps, first tooth, nursery, school, etc). Augment the timeline with photos, pictures and other memorabilia.

Depending on the space available, the location and the purpose, the timeline could be a couple of sheets of A4, or be mounted along a wall, or laid out on the floor with enough space for people to walk around it and reflect. You could give mourners coloured post-it notes so that they can write comments and responses or indicate whether the event was a time of joy or sadness.

The Scripture Union Bible Timeline shows God's story, the Bible from before time began to after time ends. If appropriate, talk about how God is always present in the times of joy and sadness that the people in the Bible faced.

**Trees**

Trees appear a number of times in the Bible (e.g. Garden of Eden, Moses and the Burning Bush, Zaccheus) and can be a helpful metaphor about how we grow and change as we get older. Jesus described himself as a vine, whilst not strictly a tree, his illustration helps us to think about how we are connected and where we draw our strength from.

Plant a tree in the school grounds to commemorate the person/people that has/have died. If there is no space why not talk to the local authority...
about the possibility of planting a tree in a nearby park.

Give everyone some red card luggage labels and some green ones. On the red cards they can write or draw the things they felt they ‘lost’ during the Coronavirus crisis (e.g. exams, time with friends, feelings of safety) and on the green cards the things that they feel they gained during the Coronavirus (e.g. more time with Mum, high score/next level on favourite game, taught grandparents to facetime). N.b. This might be really hard for vulnerable children or ones who have been bereaved. Be sensitive and whilst not dismissing the huge loss, help them to think creatively about one thing that was good during the period. Tie the labels to branches of a tree or bush (this can be done outside on a living tree - using environmentally friendly materials - or on dead branches brought inside). As you do this you can acknowledge together the loss and celebrate the gain.

Cairns

In the Old Testament, people often used a pile of stones as a marker of a significant event. Sometimes today you might see them as markers on country paths. You could use little pebbles or large rocks to create a cairn as a marker of either a bereavement or a significant event like the Coronavirus lockdown. Hand size pebbles can be decorated with paints or felt tips and varnished before the creation of the cairn. Large rocks might need to be moved by adults, but children could be responsible for planting in the gaps as symbols of growth and hope.

Additional resources

Social Media resources

Extra Resources

(Walking in their Shadow – Lex Bradley – extra resources)

Additional ideas for parents and children

1. Keep a memory box to keep photographs, bits of information

2. Write your memories of the person in a special book. You could include:
   1. Things they liked to do
   2. Things they liked to say
   3. Their expressions or mannerisms
   4. Their interests
   5. Times friends and families spent with them – earliest memories
   6. Something they enjoyed doing – an interest / a place they loved to visit
   7. Special events in the person’s life

3. Select a few special photographs to display in your home
5. Write a prayer and read it aloud whilst someone blows soap bubbles into the air

6. Write a letter to the person

7. Keep a diary or journal

8. Create and dedicate a piece of art to their memory

9. Create and dedicate a piece of music to their memory

10. Create and dedicate a poem to their memory

11. Create and dedicate a piece of writing – a story or recollection of a special time you spent with them

12. Make a special birthday/Christmas/Easter/Father’s Day – Mother’s day card for them at the appropriate time – these could be kept in your memory box

CRUSE Bereavement Care has helpful information to support those who are grieving alone.

Source URL: https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/faith-home/i-am-school-leader/appendix-2-practical-guidance-documentation