



CHIVIRIKANI PRIMARY SCHOOL

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SCHOOL POLICY

Bereavement – Dealing with Death

EFFECTIVE DATE: _____

REVISION HISTORY:

As amended on:

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PURPOSE

Helping learners to deal with death and how to grieve.

BREAKING SAD NEWS TO STAFF, LEARNERS AND FAMILIES

- Obtaining factual information is a priority. Think through how this might be done, remembering that contact with those directly involved may be difficult. State in your policy the importance of not making assumptions or repeating what has been heard through rumour. This will only add to distress.
- It is essential that all staff is informed straight away, ideally before learners.
- Identify ways of doing this sensitively. Don't forget part-time and peripatetic staff.
- Learners should be told as soon as possible. This is best done in familiar groups by someone they know. A large school assembly is usually not ideal. Staff may well need guidance on words to use and approach to take. Have something prepared.
- A letter should go to families the same day if possible. A pre-prepared script will be very helpful. It is difficult to find the right words when emotional and in shock.
- Consider including guidelines for parents to support bereaved children in the letter.

IDENTIFY A TEAM, DEFINE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- Use the expertise within the school and share the responsibilities.
- Decide who will take overall charge and designate substitutes should they be absent.
- Who will be responsible for communicating with the families directly involved?
- Who will give the news to the rest of the school community?
- If the press is involved, who will liaise with them?
- Organize training for all involved.

SUPPORT TO LEARNERS

- Keep a list of professionals and school Psychologists who can come and help give counselling in case of trauma.
 - Make sure that help offered from outside is appropriate before getting involved. Learners may find it difficult to be receptive to support or counselling from families of fellow learners.
 - Identify a suitable place in school for learners who need some space if too upset to stay in the classroom and people to whom they can go to for support.
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- Remembering:
 - This is difficult to plan in advance, but careful thought is required.
 - The dead person's family needs to be consulted.
 - Schools often find that an assembly in the form of a celebration of life is appropriate.

SAYING GOODBYE

A special assembly or remembrance service after a death in a school community is helpful. It can put back a sense of normality into what might have been a very unsettled time. Below are some ideas to help you organize something appropriate:

Why Hold A Special Assembly?

- To bring the school together to acknowledge what has happened.
- To reflect on the life of the person who has died.
- To normalize and share grief.
- To give the message that it is OK to be sad but equally OK to not be affected.
- To inform learners and staff of any support that is available.

Who Should Attend?

- Anyone who wishes to be there, staff (teaching and non-teaching), learners and any family members who feel able to do so.
- In a very large school it may not be possible to get everyone together and a peer group assembly might be more appropriate.
- Many families find comfort in other people organising something special and appreciate being there.
- Other may not wish to participate but should be given the opportunity to do so.

Who Should Be Involved?

- Anyone who wants to.
- Learners have produced some very moving assemblies about friends who have died.
- It helps them to feel involved and gives a sense of doing something positive.
- Very young children will need greater amounts of adult input but can still participate in a way appropriate for their age and understanding.

How to structure a Special Assembly

- Have a clear beginning, middle and an end.
- **Begin** by explaining the purpose and length of the assembly.
- Follow with a brief, factual reminder of the circumstances surrounding the death and when it happened.

The Middle Section could include:

- Lighting a special remembrance candle.
- Favourite songs or poems of the person who has died.
- Learners or staff taking it in turns to recount stories or memories.
- Photographs of the person or child who has died to give a visual reminder, but remember, a large image can be too much for a grieving family.
- Placing objects associated with the dead person into a special memory box. This can then be given to the family.
- Talking about a memory tree or collage previously made from a collection of drawings that learners have created and stuck onto a large sheet of paper. This can be added to during the assembly.

How to end:

This needs some thought and is better if it can leave everyone with a sense of looking forward. Some suggestions include:

- Giving a memory box or memory book to the family.
- Blowing out the remembrance candle.
- Going outside to release balloons. These could have a message attached.
- After leaving the assembly, learners who wish to, plant a bulb to create a special memory garden.
- Asking learners to bring a farewell message to the person who has died to put into a special box as they leave. This can help learners to personalise a goodbye.
- Reflective but uplifting music helps to create the right atmosphere.

Afterwards:

- It is best to arrange the assembly before the break.
- Learners and staff will need space to reflect before carrying on with the normal school timetable.
- Some schools time it for the end of lessons but the build-up throughout the day can be difficult to handle.
- If arranged for the end of the school day, leave time for learners to compose themselves before leaving for home.
- Be prepared for different responses, some learners may be deeply affected, other not at all or react with out-of-character behaviour.
- Ensure they all know where to go for support if required.

SUPPORT FOR STAFF

- Supporting bereaved learners will be very stressful for staff who may well be already struggling with their own reactions and emotions. Include a list of outside agencies, including people at your school clinic that may be able to offer help, both for short and long term.
- Plan for some sort of informal mutual support, for example, in the staffroom at the end of the school day, to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions.

SUPPORTING A BEREAVED LEARNER

- We are often at a loss to know what to say to a child or young person who has been bereaved and what we can do to help them.
- The following are brief guidelines on how to offer support:
 - **Check out the facts** and familiarise yourself with the circumstances surrounding the death. Communicate with the family and make sure that what you say will not conflict with the family's wishes.
 - **Acknowledge what has happened** and do not be afraid to use the word dead: "I was very sorry to hear of the death of your..." If you find words difficult you can say a lot with just a touch.
 - **Children and young people need honesty.** Although sometimes difficult, it is better to answer awkward questions truthfully.
 - **Be prepared to listen**, again and again and again.
 - **Allow them to express emotion** and feelings and do not be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness.
 - **Do talk about the dead person** and share any memories. The bereaved child may well need to do this. Ignoring the dead person is a denial that they ever existed.
 - **Recognise the full tragedy.** Do not try to comfort with comments such as "at least it is not as bad as..." You may think it is helpful, it is not.
 - **Reassure them that they are not responsible.** It is very common for children and young people to feel that in some way they caused the death.
 - **Give bereaved learners time.** It may be many months before they can fully cope with the pressures of school work. Remember that they will be grieving for life and the loss will always be with them.
 - **Don't assume that a lack of reaction means that they do not care.** Initially, the full reality may not have sunk in. Young people can feel that they have to be seen to be coping as a sign of maturity.
 - **Try not to judge.** Grief is a very personal experience, every child and young person will do it their way.

Support Ideas

- **Time Out Cards**
 - The learner is given permission to leave class for a short time when beginning to feel out of control or just to get some "personal space" when upset.
 - A card is carried in their pocket and the learner may leave the room without having to ask.

- It is important that staff is made aware to avoid embarrassing scenes for either the learner or the teacher.
- It is essential that the learner does not just wander around the school but goes to a designated place and person.

• **Secret Diary**

- A way to communicate with a bereaved child who finds it difficult to verbalise feelings.
- The learner leaves it somewhere mutually agreed having written or drawn whatever they wish.
- The teacher responds in the diary and either leaves it to be picked up or discretely returns it to the learner.

• **Happy/Sad Faces**

- The bereaved learner has a sheet of paper/paper plate with two drawings of faces on either side, one happy, one sad.
- The learners show the side that reflects how they are feeling on a particular day.
- This gives the teacher an idea of how they are and therefore what approach to take.

• **I Can... You Can**

- A series of four postcards with ideas of how others can help.
- Titles include TO MY TEACHER... what you can do... A helpful communication tool.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS

- It is usually best to have minimum disruption to the timetable, but some flexibility may be required.
- Consider what the school approach will be if learners are too upset to attend lessons.
- If it is a teacher who has died, what will happen to his/her class?

THE FUNERAL

- Support the family's wishes. The family may well welcome involvement of members of the school community but equally, may wish to keep it private.
- Identify which staff and learners may want to attend and the practicalities of staff cover and transport. For some schools, it is appropriate to close, for other, it is not.
- Will flower be sent and/or a collection made? Involve staff and learners in the decision.
- Cultural and religious implications need consideration.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

Children and young people mature at different rates and their understanding and responses to bereavement are likely to be based as much on their experience of life as on their chronological age. The age categories given are guidelines only and it is important to realize that responses do vary and occur at other ages.

2 – 5 Years

- 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 will be confused by euphemisms for death such as “gone away” or “gone to sleep”.
- Children of this age may well require repeated explanations of what has happened.
- As their thinking is very much centred on themselves, they may consider that something they did or said caused the death.
- They are prone to fantasize at this age and if not told what is happening may dream up something scarier than reality.

5 – 8 Years

- At about five years of age most children realize 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.
- This can result in separation anxiety.
- 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 are likely to be very interested in the rituals surrounding death.

8 – 12 Years

- At this age children’s understanding of death almost matches that of an adult, although they find it difficult to grasp abstract concepts.
- An important factor is their deepening realization of the inevitability of death and an increasing awareness of their own mortality and the fear and insecurity that this can cause.
- The need to know details continues and may seek answers to very specific questions.

Adolescence

- 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 bereaving.
- 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.

TERMINALLY ILL CHILDREN ATTENDING SCHOOL

- Children who are terminally ill may benefit enormously from normal routines such as attending school, whilst they are able to.
- This can present challenges for the school community.
- Sensitive but honest communication between the family and professionals involved, will overcome most of these, hopefully enriching the lives of all those who come into contact with the child or young person.

- Suggestions on how to manage such situations:
 - Children, who are constantly in and out of hospital, welcome attending school as an opportunity to have some normality in their lives. Continuing to take part in school routines as much as possible can give a feeling of achievement, with the emphasis on living rather than dying. It can also give back a sense of identity as a person rather than a patient.

 - Classmates who have had the situation explained to them are usually supportive. It often helps to involve them by giving jobs such as wheelchair pushing. Try to ensure these tasks are shared and do not become the responsibility of just one child.
 - The school and family, including the sick child, need to decide together how to share the news that a learner is terminally ill. It is not easy, but an open and honest approach is usually the best way. However many adults try to hide what is happening, children instinctively know something is wrong and would often have worked out that a class member is dying before being officially told. Telling only the immediate peer group may seem like a good idea but the grapevine will take over resulting in gossip and half-truths throughout the school.
 - If the child is receiving treatment from a local hospice or hospital, there is often a nurse or social worker whose job includes visiting schools to explain to learners about a friend's illness and treatments involved. This helps alleviate any worries that fellow learners may have. It is helpful for the school to at least identify the key professional responsible for the ill child and how to contact them for advice and support.
 - Children deal with difficult situations much better when truthful explanations are given regarding absences, changing appearance, lack of energy, treatments and exclusion from activities such as sport. Being naturally curious, classmates will ask questions; these should be answered sensitively but factually. Seriously ill children are often extremely knowledgeable about their illness and may well be happy to provide the answers themselves.
 - A sense of normality is maintained by continuing to expect usual standards of behaviour within the child's limitations. This helps to reduce feelings of favouritism amongst other children.
 - Other parents and carers at school may have concerns surrounding their own children being upset or made anxious by a classmate who is seriously ill. Reassurance that children and young people will have fewer anxieties if presented with the truth, rather than having to make up what is happening, may help. With consent from the family of the sick child, information on the illness and treatments will help other parents and carers to understand and feel informed. The realization that their children are contributing to an increased quality of life for the sick child may create a more positive approach. Offer information on what to say to children when someone is dying.

