

# SCHOOLS INFORMATION PACK

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 pupils' family member, or the death of a key member in the school community such as a governor or popular visitor to the school.

The following pack has been designed by teachers, for teachers. It draws on the experiences of school staff and the input of Winston's Wish. The hope is that you will never have to use this pack. If however you do, it will give you confidence and plenty of ideas for how to deal with the subject in lessons, tutorials and assemblies, as well as on an individual basis.

Contained over the following pages are;

**Aids for speaking with a pupil about a death in their family**

**Tips for speaking with pupils about death**

**Learning ideas for classroom activities with National Curriculum references**

**Assembly and whole school communication ideas**

**Ideas for memorial activities**

As you read the pack, make sure that you remain aware of your own feelings and emotions. Many of us will have to read these either having been affected by recent events ourselves, or having memories of past personal experiences.

For more help, advice or ideas please ring the Winston's Wish Helpline (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm) on **08088 020 021** and speak to our experienced practitioners.

# HOW DO I TALK ABOUT IT?

"My mum died and my life changed forever, it was the biggest thing that ever happened to me. My teacher never mentioned it."

Sometimes our natural reaction to death is not to talk about it. We assume that the bereaved person will not want to, that they will view us as nosey, and we fear that by mentioning it we will upset them.

The worst thing that could happen...already has! Most bereaved children will at some point be very glad to have the chance to talk about what has happened, and will appreciate that a teacher cares enough to ask about them and their feelings. Although the teacher involved with the quote above had acted with the best intentions, and had not wanted to upset their student, what the pupil perceived from their actions was that the teacher did not care. This only added to their hurt.

Following are some simple tips for speaking with young people about death.

- **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. A recent post on our website from a school pupil said this; *"Miss B showed us this website, she wrote down some things about her Nan, and she started to cry when she told us that her boyfriend never met her Nan, and her Nan would love him"*
- **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 dependant 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.

# WHAT ARE THEY FEELING?

## Children under 2 years old

Very young children and babies are not able to understand death. However, if a death occurs in the life of a child in this age group they experience the loss as a separation from someone they have an attachment to. And although children at this age do not have much language to express their loss they will react to it. They may search for the person who died; they may cry inconsolably or be withdrawn.

Children this age will also be affected by the emotional state of other important people in their lives. It is important that as normal a routine as possible is maintained for the child. They will respond to a steady, loving, interested environment which will enable them to continue to thrive. As the child grows, so will their ability to understand and use speech to express themselves and so there will be opportunities to talk about the person who died and help them build their own story. When a child this young experiences the death of a parent it is particularly important they are helped to know about the person as it is an integral part of their history.

## Children aged 2 to 5

Children aged between 2 to 5 years think that death is reversible and that people who have died can come back. Their thoughts are characterised by what we call "magical thinking". Children can be convinced that it was something they said or did or thought that caused the person to die. The flip side of this thinking is that they can believe their words, actions or thoughts can bring the dead person back. They need to be reassured repeatedly that the death was not their fault. Children's thinking in this age range is also concrete – they cannot grasp abstract concepts or roundabout ways of saying things. Instead use specific concrete words such as "Mummy has died" and give specific explanations about why the person died. Don't be afraid to be honest and tell your child if you don't have an answer.

It is not unusual for children of this age to revert to behaviour patterns they had when they were younger such as bed-wetting, use of a security blanket or thumb sucking. Try to be tolerant. In time, these earlier behaviour patterns will probably disappear again, once family life resumes.

One of the most difficult aspects of a child's grief at these ages is how they ask the same questions over and over again in an effort to begin making sense of their loss. Children are naturally curious and they want to make sense of what is happening in their world. Their repeated questions are not a sign that your explanations aren't good enough - it is just the way they do things at this age. 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. When they experience a death in this age range they are at their most helpless and are most dependent on adults to regain their balance.

## Children aged 6 to 9

In this age range the child begins to develop an understanding of death as irreversible and something that will happen to all living things but they may be confused about it. It is not uncommon for children to think of death as something spooky, like a zombie or a spirit that comes to get you. It is important that their specific worries are spoken about, that they share bad dreams and are told that what they're feeling is normal. Children are reassured by having their worrying and negative thoughts talked through, giving them skills and confidence to be in charge of them.

Children may display what you feel is an unhealthy curiosity with 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 explanations. They may worry about how the person who has died will eat, breath and keep warm. It is important to give them information and tell them that once someone has died, the body doesn't feel any more and they don't get hungry.

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.

Children this age may have difficulty expressing feelings verbally and may retreat into themselves. In dealing with their feelings of helplessness, you may notice increased aggression. It is important to avoid clichés such as “You’re such a brave boy/girl”. Children will interpret this that you want or need them not to share their feelings. They need you and other important people in their lives to show them that it’s OK to express 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.

### **Adolescents**

Friends and peers are increasingly important as young people develop their ideas of who they are and what is important to them. They want to be accepted by other important people in their lives. Their bodies are changing, they are aware of all sorts of possibilities for themselves and are more aware of the future - their future. It is quite common for risk-taking behavior to increase during adolescence as young people test the boundaries.

They may struggle to make longer term plans as the death of someone important causes them to reflect on “the meaning of life” and ponder on the question “what’s the point?” Or you may find that they are so busy with different activities they don’t stop to reflect. This can be an effective way of keeping intense feelings under wraps if they are worried about losing control of their emotions.

If you notice a teenager who is withdrawing, acting very matter of fact and detached, or angry and protesting, then remain available for them - but don’t push. Your job is to remind them that you’re there and if they’d prefer to speak to someone else you’ll help them find peers or other trusted adults to support them. Although an adolescent’s growing process is most like an adult’s they are still going through important emotional development at this age and are not ready to manage adult responsibilities even if at times they think they are adult. They need to be reassured of your love and support and to know that the limits you set are still enforced.

# A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Many of the ideas contained within this pack for assemblies and lessons are only appropriate when the school community as a whole has experienced a death, for example a teacher, a pupil or another staff member.

Perhaps a more common experience for teachers and LSW's is that of a pupil experiencing the death of a parent. Whole school or class activities will not normally be appropriate in this situation, but the needs of that individual pupil still need careful consideration. These hints, tips, and ideas will help you to engage with an individual pupil in such an instance. Remember, they may want to do all, some or none of these. They may want to talk straight away, or not for several months. Knowing that you are available, honest, understanding and trustworthy will be a great comfort to the pupil concerned.

The death of a parent or sibling is often a shocking thing. Even if a long-term illness has meant that the death was expected, no amount of preparation can make someone numb to the experience, nor should it.

## **What should I expect?**

Often a pupil may be off school for a few days after the death. Immediately after the death the prospect of them ever coming back to school again can seem impossible for them to comprehend. Or, it may be the very thing that they want so that they can "experience normality" again and "take their mind off things". It is impossible to know quite how a pupil of yours may react. A simple phone call home can be a great way of determining this and also letting the family know that you care. No pupil has ever failed to be impressed by a teacher who went out of their way to make a tough phone call. A quick visit to the family home can also be especially helpful, and help you to get some idea of the family's frame of mind.

## **How should I tell the class?**

Before they return to school, ask the pupil if they would like you to explain to other friends or classmates what has happened. They may like you to do it, or for you to do it together, or not at all – make sure the decision is theirs. During this chat though, it is good to remain confident in the fact that it is usually best if peers at school are told. They will find out at some point anyway, and so controlling the manner in which they do find out is often better than rumours circulating.

They may like to get straight back into things and be treated almost as if nothing has happened. The chances are that they will have been surrounded by grieving family members for days and all they want is a break from it. Equally they may want to answer questions from their classmates – this can help some children cope. Again, make sure the decision is theirs and that you are available to support them the whole time.

## **What can I do to make their return to school as easy as possible?**

Whilst the pupil is off school, you may like to ask them if it is ok if you tell the rest of the class what has happened. If so, get the class to write letters or cards to them, assuring them of how sorry they are to hear the news, but also how much they are looking forward to them coming back and helping them with the school play, playing football, going to the shops together. This will be a great parcel for you to deliver to the family home, and will make the return to school much easier.

Keep the pupil informed about what is going on. Include what the class have been studying, but also some other news; who has been told off, who is going out with who and who fell off their chair in French! This simply keeps the bonds between you and the pupil strong, as well as keeping them up-to-date with their school life; they will probably be quite worried about falling behind.

Organise their first day back to be not quite normal. Get them to come in at break time, this way they can talk to who they want to rather than be subjected to all kinds of questioning before school. Maybe have some of their best friends meet them and chat together in the staffroom for a bit – make them feel special.

## **Will their behaviour have changed?**

Maybe. This won't be a permanent thing, but immediately after the death they may not seem their 'normal' self. They may:

- Have less concentration.

- Be a lot more tired and therefore irritable.
- Have a heightened sensitivity to comments and remarks.
- Be so wrapped up in their own feelings that they fail to take the feelings of others into account, which can result in arguments and fights.
- Could have a lot of un-vented anger and frustration that their parent has died.

It is important that you recognise that some, or all these things may happen, and that you are ready to be patient and understanding. It is also important though that normal rules and expectations of behaviour are maintained. This can feel harsh in some circumstances, but a routine actually helps, and a lack of it will cause more problems within the class and amongst peers.

### **How long will it take before they are over it?**

Nobody ever 'gets over it'. Their life has changed forever. Of course they will not always feel as emotional as they may do right now, and their life will return to a less shocked state, but it will be different for ever.

There is no hard and fast rule for grieving. Some people are hit by their feelings right away, others seem fine for months and then it suddenly strikes them, others manage to keep it very much under their control. Your pupil will appreciate being given a little time to come to terms with what has happened and be thankful of your patience.

### **Since his Dad's death he has been really difficult, but I struggle to tell him off as I feel bad – piling my problems on top of ones he already has.**

Following the death of someone close to them, a child's behaviour may well be intermittently affected by their grief. They can sometimes sense a lack of control over their emotions, and may react in some situations in a way that you might not expect, or which is unpredictable.

If a bereaved pupil displays behaviour that needs to be challenged and punished it is right that this is done. Do not be afraid to use standard punishments for bad behaviour (detentions for not doing homework in the week of the funeral may not be appropriate but a detention for punching a peer would be). It is important though that your student understands exactly why they are being punished. Also, avoid using phrases such as "What would your Dad say? Is this the way in which he would want you to behave?" This piles an enormous amount of false guilt, shame and emotion onto the young person, and is not fair.

### **They don't seem to be getting much support at home, what can I do to help them remember the person who has died?**

There are many things that you could do with the pupil in order to help them remember the person who has died. You could help them to create a book of memories filled with photos, stories, cards and letters; you could suggest they make a memory box and talk with them about what they might include; you could hold a small candlelight ceremony with them; have a balloon release and let their messages rise to the sky; help them create a calendar of important dates and ways in which they could mark them; plant some bulbs in a pot which will become flowers dedicated to the memory of the person who has died.

You could also talk about a First Aid Kit, a collection of things that make them feel better on bad days.

### **Jack's Mum died last year. He is currently being very unsympathetic to another child in the class whose grandparent died last month. Jack says it is not as important to lose a grandparent. What do I tell him?**

It sometimes seems natural to us, that a whole year after a death, a child should have learned what their feelings are, and be able to manage them. This is not the case though. Our emotions do not run in yearly cycles and it may take many months before a child experiences a thought or emotion for the first time. The death of a friend's grandparent may bring Jack's own feelings and thoughts to the surface, possibly for the first time.

Some children also automatically impose a hierarchy of death onto all situations. They may feel that the death of a parent is worse than the death of an uncle, and the death of an uncle more important than the death of a great grandparent, and the death of a friend somewhere in the middle. This may seem a natural thing to conclude, but it is not always true. As stated earlier, the relationship that the child had with the person who died is the determining factor, not the name given to that relationship. Some second cousins may in actual fact be a lot closer to a child, and do a lot more of their 'parenting' than their real parents – this may not seem obvious to an onlooker.

Encourage Jack (or your pupil in the same situation) to realise that their classmate is feeling very similar things to them a year ago. What could Jack suggest that would help them now?

# A DEATH IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

A death within the school community can have a huge effect on the school as a whole. Speaking with a single child about the death of a parent or sibling needs to be discreet and sensitive to their individual needs, dealing with a death which affects many pupils has to be far more 'managed' by the school.

The following ideas are specifically designed to be used when a whole school is affected by a death of a student, a staff member or other significant adult, or both. The assembly ideas detail how to break the news of a death, and how that person who has died can be remembered by the whole school community.

Also downloadable are several lesson ideas, ready to be used by individual teachers and LSW's should they feel that a class needs to explore the issue of death and their reactions to it further. Pupils will benefit greatly from being able to take part in these activities, place their feelings in context and realise that their feelings, although maybe alien to them, are totally normal. It is not intended that a school use all these ideas – students would not want to spend the whole week talking about death in every single lesson. What they are intended to show though is that speaking about death can be done in a positive way, and students can be helped to understand what is going on in an open, safe and nurturing environment. This is always better than children suppressing and hiding these feelings and thoughts.

The lesson ideas are designed so that a lesson can easily be built from them, and the ideas adapted to best suit your needs. They are cross-referenced with National Curriculum programmes of Study, and can be used easily across a range of subjects.

## ASSEMBLY / GROUP IDEAS

There are occasions when staff at a school may have to use a gathering such as an assembly to convey information about a death. Following are some ideas used in schools, which have already helped to make the job a little easier for the staff member concerned. These assembly ideas are designed for occasions when there has been a death within the school community, not when an individual pupil has experienced the death of a close relative.

All of these ideas can be easily adapted to suit any size gathering, and take little or no preparation.

# MEMORY STONES

The concept of memory stones is a very simple one, yet it is a great tool 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. It is rough, and has sharp bits. 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 best holiday, or a special trip to the theatre, or an evening spent watching DVD's curled up together on the sofa.

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 have a set of the three stones. This will help them to remember the point and manage their feelings.

# BREAKING THE NEWS

This is usually only done when a student or a staff member has died. Publicly talking about a single student who has experienced the death of a parent over the weekend may not be the best thing to do.

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. You may wish to use this as a starting point, saying something like:

"Many of you may have heard a story in the playground or in the newspapers about Mr Nichols. 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 Mr Nichols 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".

After this it might seem like a good time to pause for a moment before filling pupils in with more information. 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 his class, will they be able to do anything to mark the occasion, and if there is anyway that they can help.

# HOLDING A MEMORIAL

After a death, we can often be left with a strong urge to 'do something' which marks the significance of the death and which states its importance to us. For family members this is usually the funeral or a ceremony of some other sort. It is not always either appropriate or possible for school children to attend these occasions though, so facilitating something within the school context is very important. The following are just a few ideas that are easy to do, yet significant. They of course can be combined.

- Light a candle and reflect
- Listen to some music. Maybe a significant piece to the person who has died – you may want to combine this with lighting a candle.
- Create a memory box or book. Invite pupils to write a memory in the book about the person who has died, or place an object that means something to them and that has a story attached to it in the memory box. This box could then be displayed, or kept, or presented to the family of the person who died. (Children make mistakes, which especially in sensitive circumstances can upset them. You may want to get them to write on cards which are then stuck into the book, rather than directly into the book itself).
- Plant a tree in memory of the person
- Create a plaque, or wall display to commemorate their life
- Were they sporty? Name a cup after them and hold an annual sports tournament to win the trophy, or present it to the most improved sportsperson of the year.
- Did they like singing or acting? Hold a cabaret event in their honour.
- Invite pupils to write poems, songs and letters to or about the person who died.
- Hold a balloon release ceremony where pupils each attach a message to helium filled balloons, and then all release them together.
- Hold a minute's silence.
- Get the school canteen to serve the person's favourite meal one day. If they died of an illness, raise funds to support an appropriate charity that works with sufferers of that illness.