

ROYAL SCHOOL, ARMAGH



Bereavement & Loss Policy

September 2020

Ethos & Rationale

This policy outlines practical measures to be taken when people are in shock, or upset, especially with sudden or multiple deaths or traumatic circumstances. The policy recognises that feelings of shock, upset and loss do not only accompany news of a death but can also accompany news of domestic disruption such as serious illness or separation.

This Policy outlines the basic principles and procedures that underpin our approach to supporting members of the school community with bereavement and loss. Bereavement affects everybody at some time, and as a close community, our school aims to provide the best support for its members during times of bereavement.

The school ethos and mission focusses on the importance of care for the individual and this policy should be read, interpreted and applied in a manner which is consistent with the ethos and mission.

'Death neither obeys the school timetable nor appears on it ...it enters the classroom without knocking.'
Winston's Wish

We recognise that each bereavement and loss is unique, and that any guidelines we have developed must take account of individual circumstances and the wishes of those most closely involved. We have suitably trained staff in school who understand the complexities surrounding bereavement, and can help support families at times of bereavement to ensure that the school does the best it can to meet the needs of the bereaved.

It is important that children are helped to understand bereavement in clear and unambiguous ways, and given opportunities to experience the full range of emotions that may accompany bereavement within a safe and supportive atmosphere. As a school, we recognise the importance of long term support for those who are bereaved, and will endeavour to provide opportunities for remembrance where appropriate.

Through its pastoral structure and links with outside agencies the Royal School is well-placed to help children and young people to explore and develop an awareness and understanding of death as well as to support those personally affected by it. An important part of this is the ability to support pupils, families, and staff at times of loss and bereavement, as well as helping children and young people to support their peers, thereby decreasing the sense of isolation that can be part of it.

Every death and the circumstances in which it occurs is different and this policy has been constructed to guide us on how to deal professionally, sensitively, and compassionately with difficult matters in upsetting circumstances.

The school is committed to the emotional health and well-being of its staff and pupils. We wish to work towards this in all aspects of school life, and to provide an ethos, environment and curriculum that support and prepare pupils for coping with separation or loss of a loved one.

This policy is for all staff, pupils, parents/carers, governors, visitors, and partner agencies working within our school. It has been developed to complement our Critical Incident Management Strategy. All aspects of Safeguarding will be embedded into the life of our school and will be the responsibility of all staff.

Policy Aims

The Royal School will endeavour:

- To support all those affected by loss and death in a supportive and caring environment in which everyone can respond appropriately to individual circumstances;
- To be sensitive to the impact of loss and grief on children and young people's physical and emotional health;
- To increase our understanding of pupil and staff reactions to loss and how the school should best respond to meet the needs of grieving pupils, parents, and staff;
- To guide the school in appropriate approaches to managing situations of bereavement and loss;
- To give pastoral support for pupils, parents, and staff.

Roles and responsibilities

The Headmaster will have overall responsibility for support and liaison in event of a death or traumatic loss. In the event that the Headmaster is absent then the Head of Pastoral Care will take responsibility.

These responsibilities are:

- Implementation of the policy and reflecting on its effectiveness in practice;
- Using the expertise within our school and sharing the responsibilities;
- Co-ordinating the planned action to manage school-related incidents;
- Deciding who will be responsible for communicating with the family directly involved;
- Deciding who gives news to the school community and if necessary who will communicate with the press;
- Establishing and co-ordinating links with external agencies;
- Liaison within the school;
- Accessing and co-ordinating training and support for staff.

The person responsible will take into consideration the following short-term support:

- Who should break the news about a death;
- What exactly the children or young people will be told;
- How they will be told (e.g. whole school assembly, class, individual);
- When they will be told;
- How the information will be communicated to parents and staff;
- What questions might be asked by pupils, staff, and parents;
- What links will be made with the family;
- Consider what will be appropriate in holding some form of remembrance activity.

Procedures

Our school will endeavour to (if deemed appropriate):

- As deemed appropriate in the circumstances the school will endeavour to speak to the family, if possible, offer them condolences and support before ascertaining what they would like to happen;
- Give them access to a telephone number for someone they can contact in school;
- Obtain factual information to avoid unnecessary speculation;
- Inform staff as soon as possible;
- Decide where pupils will be told if this is necessary;
- Identify the most vulnerable pupils and give the support they may need;
- Tell the pupils as soon as possible in familiar groups by someone they know;
- Send a letter to families as soon as possible (if deemed necessary);
- Offer advice and guidance to parents on supporting bereaved children.

The Funeral

Our school will:

Support the family in a way that deemed both appropriate and practical by the school and family. This could include input into the funeral arrangements, representation of pupils and staff and sending of cards or other gestures of sympathy.

Support for bereaved children

Not all children and young people will need the support of specialist practitioners; they most often need familiar people who care. Pupils will react to bereavement/loss in a variety of ways; no two reactions are the same. Personality, family support and life experiences will all impact on children's responses.

Adults often wish to shield children from pain and distress. Experience and research have shown, however, that **children are best supported by having the incident acknowledged in an appropriate way rather than having it ignored.**

It is important to be available and receptive to pupils, to listen to them, to empathise with them, acknowledge their emotions and accept them as normal, thus enabling the development of healthy coping strategies.

It is normal for adults to be upset and it can be appropriate for children and young people to be aware of this because it can help them to understand their own emotions. Staff working directly with pupils can show that they are upset, but not out of control. It is important to maintain a safe, secure and predictable environment for the pupils in their care. Staff should remember that they are modelling a response for children and young people and helping them to develop coping skills.

The positive effect that concern and support from a caring, familiar adult can have on a pupil should never be underestimated.

PRIMARY EFFECTS

First reactions to bereavement or loss may include some or all of the following:

- Disbelief
- Anger
- Panic
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Crying
- Talking: repeating what they have experienced/heard
- Inability to process information well (so that they may not hear/take in what has happened or what has been said to them)
- Regression: we all regress when we hear bad news. We want to be looked after and protected.
- Sadness
- Withdrawal
- Aggression

Grieving responses (Worden) may include some or all of the following:

- Shock, disbelief, numbness - Life has lost its meaning. Shock can take the form of physical pain or numbness, but more often consists of complete apathy and withdrawal or abnormal calm, in some cases with anger.
- Denial – This generally occurs within the first 14 days and can last minutes, hours or weeks. No loss is acknowledged.
- Growing Awareness - waves of savage feelings, over which there is temporarily no control - tears, anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, depression (feelings of redundancy, lack of self-worth).
- Acceptance - relearning the world and situations.

(More information is available from the EA's Critical Incident Team, for staff, pupils, and parents)

SECONDARY EFFECTS

Associated with the above Primary Effects are Secondary Effects of which teachers should be aware. These may include some or all of the following:

- Change in behaviour
- Change in peer groups
- Loss of motivation
- Lack of achievement
- Poor Hygiene
- Change in family role
- Effects on relationships
- A diminution in the quality of academic work
- Withdrawal from extra curricular activities

Staff are aware that grief may be delayed or may re-emerge years later. The feelings and needs of bereaved children may vary. Some children see school as a haven of peace and normality in contrast to the trauma at home. Conversely other children may find school is the place to express their feelings.

Staff should be alert to:

- Changes in behaviour
- Mood swings
- Psychosomatic symptoms - headaches, stomach aches etc.
- Insecurity, feeling unwanted, friendship difficulties
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Isolation and withdrawal

Useful responses from staff

- Acknowledge the event to pupils, in a confidential way, letting them know that you are available to help and support them;
- Be willing to listen and giving them time;
- Be willing to answer questions (it is not important that staff answer all questions but that they listen to pupils' fears and worries and take their queries seriously);
- Be genuine and professional;
- Be non-judgemental;
- Communicate an understanding to them that strong reactions are normal;
- Encourage pupils to talk, share their feelings and seek help as appropriate;
- Maintain a routine in school (flexible, caring and containing);
- Be mindful when approaching pupils about the quality of work or work which has been missed;
- Offer sensitivity, care, and empathy.

School will endeavour to provide appropriate support through the following possible interventions:

- Provision of a routine, which can have a stabilising effect;
- Some space, away from an emotionally intense atmosphere;
- A context of neutral space and people with whom children and young people can share their feelings without the worry of upsetting a loved one;
- Time for the pupils to be themselves without feeling guilty (being with friends, time to play in a safe space outside the home environment);
- Regular correspondence with home, providing reassurance about behaviour and general well-being, ensuring the child or young person is managing their grief;
- Access to appropriate resources via their Head of Year;
- Preparation time for children and young people to discuss what to say and how to behave when the bereaved child or young person returns to school;
- Time for staff to be aware of changes in behaviour that may be related to the death;
- An individual link person to support the pupils when necessary;
- A suitable place in school for pupils who need some space if too upset to stay in the classroom and people to whom they can go for support. – a TIME OUT Card may be used.

Support for staff

School will:

- Support bereaved staff and acknowledge they may be struggling with their own reactions and emotions while supporting pupils;
- The School will staff will be informed of the death of a colleague's parent, parent in law, spouse, children or siblings unless the colleagues asks for this information to be not shared;
- The School will inform colleagues about the death of another relative if requested;
- Plan for informal mutual support to give staff an opportunity to share feelings and reactions;
- Give people time to attend the funeral, if appropriate;
- Offer general training for all staff;
- Be aware of all supporting information and resources available.

Support for parents

School will:

- Communicate with the family straight away and offer support;
- Send a letter/card or other appropriate act of condolence;
- Give out information to appropriate people depending on the families' wishes;
- Give parents and family the opportunity to collect any personal belongings of the person who has died;
- Send a representative (s) to the funeral if deemed appropriate;
- Facilitate a collection/flowers to be sent if deemed appropriate;
- Invite parents/carers to any commemorative events held by the school.

Acknowledgements

The School will consider (if deemed appropriate) the following opportunities to commemorate loss for parents/carers, staff, and pupils:

- celebration assemblies and other commemorative activities as per the wishes of the family;
- support to individuals who wish to talk about their experiences;
- support to pupils who need to explore and learn to understand their emotions;
- opportunities to talk within a group about their experiences.

Procedures on learning of the death of a member of staff

1. Provide information to The Board of Governors, Teaching and Non-Teaching Staff, Pupils and Parents;
2. Provide information to absent staff;
3. Care should be taken to ensure that close family members are not informed as part of larger cohorts of pupils or staff;
4. The Headmaster (or his deputy) will make a statement to appropriate media (if deemed necessary);
5. Arrange for staff/pupil condolences;
6. The Head of Pastoral Care (or a deputy) will arrange for support for individual/group members of staff;
7. Contact Pupil Personal Development Services Tel: 028 3751 2515;

8. The Headmaster (or his deputy) will consider the circumstances and make appropriate arrangements for expressions of sympathy:
 - Expression of feelings – Collection of Personal belongings - Card/wreath
 - Services – Funeral – Communication of the Death via suitable methods – Book of Condolence
 - Commemoration

Procedures on learning of the death of a parent

1. Convey information to staff, pupils (as appropriate);
2. Make arrangements for an appropriate expression of sympathy, for example;
 - Contact home - Personal Visit - Sympathy Card – Appropriate representation at funeral.

Breaking news to individual pupils

There may be occasions when School will be required to break the news to a pupil of the death of someone close to them. It is recognised this is an unpleasant task for school staff.

- Pupils should be spoken to by the most senior member of staff available and/or another colleague with whom they have a close pastoral connection;
- This should be done in a private space (paying attention to usual safeguarding requirements);
- It should be done in clear and unambiguous language which is not open to misinterpretation;
- There should be no expectation that the pupil will respond in a particular way;
- The pupil should not then be left alone;
- Consideration should be given to asking the pupil if they have a close friend they would like to be with them after the news has been broken to them.

Procedures on supporting a child returning to school

Refer to: iMatter: Promoting emotional health and wellbeing - A Guide to Managing Critical Incidents in Schools

What Are the Needs of a Bereaved Child?

- Friendship
- Support
- Understanding
- To talk and be listened to
- Reassurance
- Increase in self-esteem
- An alleviation of isolation
- Routine
- Time to express feelings if they wish to
- Space

Long term illness

School will:

- Designate one person to make and maintain appropriate contact with the child/staff family to find out their wishes about staff visiting;
- Ensure they keep abreast of any developments without causing distress to the family;
- Advise staff of the family's wishes;
- Support the school community with accurate information and support.

Procedures on learning of a child affected by their parents' separation / divorce/temporary absence

It takes a long time for children to adjust to their parents' separation/divorce and it is not usually a smooth road, but the more opportunities children have to express and understand their feelings, the easier this transition will be. However, some pupils may not wish to talk, and this must be respected too. Some separations or divorces may involve traumatic or dramatic events whilst others may be more cordial. The circumstances or events attending a separation or divorce may or may not lessen the impact upon a child.

Remember: *"Family breakdown is not an event but a process. The process may take years to settle down."* (An Eye to Their Future, resource pack, for working with the impact of family breakdown).

1. The Head of Year or other appropriate pastoral colleague should advise the necessary staff in a confidential manner;
2. Be sensitive towards the child and his/her parents. Acknowledge the pupil's loss privately (as appropriate) and assure them of your support and availability;
3. Make arrangements to ensure both parents are kept up to date with their child's progress, if possible;
4. Address issues of loss through Personal Development for Mutual Understanding/registration time/assemblies;

Confidentiality

Although it is important to maintain confidentiality throughout the handling of any incident or disclosure, pupils will be made aware that complete confidentiality in some circumstances cannot be guaranteed. This will help in retaining the trust of pupils and parents/carers and will ensure that the sharing even of appropriate information is kept to a minimum. Sensitive information is only disclosed internally or externally with careful attention to the rights and needs of individuals. When the child/young person returns to school it is important to discuss with them whether they want certain people with whom they come into contact to be informed, such as the leaders of extra-curricular activities.

Inclusion and equality

Our school welcomes pupils from across the world and with a range of cultural and religious customs and procedures concerning death and that there may be different expectations of the bereaved child and family. We will work to present a balance of different approaches to death and loss. Pupils and staff will be made aware that there are a range of different responses to bereavement and that we need to value and respect each one of these.

Responding to the media

Some incidents and deaths, particularly those in sudden or traumatic circumstances, may attract media attention. All members of staff will be advised not to respond to media requests and to refer all enquiries to the Headmaster, who will make a considered response after consulting the Board of Governors and seeking assistance from the Education Authority Communications Office. Pupils will be given advice regarding the above.

Staff and pupils must be cognisant of the effect of posting materials, comments and opinions onto social media sites without considering the effect on families and other individuals.

Staff support and training

It is important that all staff feel confident in delivering support for pupils and mutual support for each other. Bereavement awareness training will be provided for staff as appropriate.

Monitoring and evaluation

This policy will be reviewed annually by the Headmaster or his deputy to consider any developments, good practice or Statutory Guidance. Any changes made will be shared with pupils, staff and Governors.

Links to other policies:

- The School Mission Statement,
- Critical Incident Policy & Procedures,
- Religious Education Policy,
- Pastoral Care policy,
- Anti-Bullying Policy,
- Safeguarding & Child Protection Policy,
- Positive Behaviour Policy,
- School Attendance Policy,
- Health and Safety Policy.