John Perry Primary School

Supporting pupils and the community through bereavement

Policy Date: June 2024

Review date: June 2025

Aims

The aim of this policy is to provide guidance for school leaders and staff in supporting the school community in circumstances of bereavement.

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1.Talking to pupils, families and the school community about a death

Contact the bereaved child's family
The Head Teacher or other Strategic Leader should make this difficult phone call.

They will have some notes prepared ahead of time. For example:

- **Acknowledge what has happened** – "I'm so sorry to hear that Gemma's grandmother died yesterday." ○ If appropriate, the staff member will ask how the death occurred – staff need an understanding of what's happened so the child can be supported
  (and the rest of your school community) appropriately
- **Express support on behalf of the school** – "I'm calling to let you know that we're here for you and for Gemma and to see if there's anything we can do to help." ○ Explain what sort of support we have available at school, e.g. a wellbeing team, that will keep in touch with the pupil as they grieve
- **Discuss how to share the news with the rest of the school community** – "Would it be alright for me to let Gemma's teachers and classmates know what's happened? I'm sure they'll want to be there for her right now."
- **Ask the family if you can share their contact information** – "Gemma's class would probably like to reach out to her so she doesn't feel alone right now. How should I tell them to get in touch with her?"

Take the following steps in line with what you've agreed with the family (for example, about how much information they're happy for you to share and who with, and whether/how they wish to be contacted with condolences).

Notify staff
Strategic Leaders need to let the bereaved child's class teacher know what's happened. They may also wish to contact the child's closest friends The Head Teacher might tell the rest of the staff at this point, or may wish to limit this to teachers or staff members the child is taught by or close to.

Contact the bereaved child's closest friends (age appropriate)
These children are likely to be most affected by the news, so the class teacher should contact their parents or carers by phone before making the news known to the wider community.

Notes will be prepared ahead of time:

- **Be direct about what's happened** and avoid using euphemisms like 'passed away' or 'passed on' to avoid confusion – "I have some very sad news that affects your child. Her friend Gemma's grandmother died yesterday. Gemma wanted your child to know."
- **Ask the parents to break the news,** even for older children – "I'm sure that your child will be upset to hear about this, so it would be best if the news came from you so you can support them."
- **Let the parents know that you haven't told the wider school community yet** and ask for their discretion until you've done so – "We've been in touch with Gemma's family and they're grieving right now. They need some time to absorb what's happened before we let the rest of the school know. We'd be grateful if you kept this upsetting news to yourself for now."
- **Tell the parents how their child can communicate with the bereaved child** – "Gemma's parents said your child can call her tomorrow morning. Her number is..."

Contact the bereaved child's classmates/year group
These are the children who know the bereaved child personally and may even have met the person who's passed away. It's not necessary to call them individually, but we may wish to contact their families by email or post.

Let the rest of the school community know
If appropriate, use a standard method of whole-school communication (e.g. a newsletter or email) to notify the rest of the school about the death. As before, avoid using euphemisms. Be direct about what's happened and remember to only share details and contact information if permitted to do so by the family.

2. Talking about death and grieving

When talking to bereaved children, staff are reminded to:

- **Listen and validate** – children often don't recognise their feelings as grief. Staff should let them know that whatever they're feeling is normal and okay
- **Acknowledge their fears** – children's fears, no matter how irrational, are real and can't always be taken away. Just knowing that someone they trust is listening to them is helpful
- **Reassure, but only as much as staff can do so honestly** – for example, a child whose family member has died from an illness will quite rationally be afraid of other family members dying. It's unhelpful to try to calm a child's fears by saying that won't happen when it already has, and it can diminish the child's

trust in adults. Rather, staff should acknowledge the possibility but counter with facts about how rare this is

- **Check their understanding** – children can be very literal, and what might seem obvious to adults may not be so clear to them. As staff talk to them, they should regularly check that they understand what you've said
- **Share your own feelings** – it's okay to let children know that staff are also sad and upset. It can be reassuring that what they're feeling is normal

Staff will ask the family about their rituals and beliefs around death so that discussion in school supports this view

If the bereaved child is struggling to express themselves
Grief is overwhelming at any age, and children may struggle to express what they're going through. Staff may choose to start the conversation by:

- Sharing Lost for words – a free e-book of advice by grieving children for grieving children
- Sharing 'Thunks on death' – a set of cards designed to open discussion about death and grief
- Completing memory books or boxes with special items and pictures associated with the person

Staff or parents/carers can refer a bereaved child to the nurture team for support.

There is also a hot clinic available in the local authority when cases can be discussed and support planned with the help of external professionals.

We also explore feelings of loss with pupils who may not be bereaved, but may have lost a relative e.g. through someone leaving

Staff to keep special occasions in mind such as Mothers' Day, anniversaries and to be sensitive about activities the child may be asked to do around this time

Staff to plan PSHE carefully and to keep in mind topics that some individuals may find triggering so need to be taught sensitively or lessons adapted

Supporting staff who are supporting bereaved pupils

Working with bereaved children is painful, and staff members involved will also need support.

Child Bereavement UK gives the following tips for managing staff who take on this important role:

- **Don't let them go at it alone** – make sure more than one staff member is assigned to each bereaved child. Not only will this share the load, but it'll also ensure that all staff assigned to a child have someone to talk to without breaching confidentiality

- **Check in with them regularly** – be proactive, and be the one reaching out. Staff may feel guilty about asking for your time in the current situation
- **Be prepared to step in** – tell them to step back if it becomes clear they're overwhelmed

- **Make bereavement training available** – many organisations offer training for school staff, including:
    - Child Bereavement UK
    - Winston's Wish
    - Cruse Bereavement Care
    - EduCare

Some members of school staff have already undertaken a childhood bereavement training module.

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