



# Bereavement Policy



**Norfolk** County Council

Approved By: Governing Body

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## **1. Introduction and Rationale**

Around 1 in 25 school aged children in Great Britain will have experienced the death of a parent or sibling. Furthermore 78% of 11-16-year olds report being bereaved of someone to whom they are close, including the death of a friend.

The way, in which all staff in our school are able to respond to the needs of bereaved children and young people, plays a crucial role at a time of great need.

Research shows that suffering a significant bereavement in childhood has the potential to have a significant impact on children's future well-being. Bereavement can be linked to a number of issues, for example bereaved children are more likely to be bullied, and a change in behaviour can sometimes lead to an increased likelihood of exclusion from school.

We know that many bereaved children and their families feel that the response from their school is sometimes unhelpful and could be much better. It is therefore vital that we listen to children and young people.

## **2. Aims/Objectives of the Policy**

The aim of this policy is to provide some basic information and practical advice, including approaches that can help all of us to know how we can support bereaved children and their families. We want to offer children appropriate support, which can have a positive and long-lasting impact on children's well-being.

Whilst it may not seem possible to get it right all the time, acknowledging the death of a family member or friend, and taking pro-active steps can make a difference.

## **3. Children's Experience of Bereavement**

Children's understanding of death will vary with their age and stage of development. Young children may not have the language or cognitive ability to tell you how they feel. Likewise, for adolescents who, although they have the understanding and language, they may be unwilling to talk to the adults around them.

Children are affected by bereavement in different ways. Some may be sad and withdrawn, others may be angry and display challenging behaviour. Some children show their grief immediately, whilst others may not at the beginning, but later, after weeks or even months. Grief is an ongoing process which children and young people revisit as they grow up and their level of understanding increases.

Children will not 'get over it', but with time learn to cope with all the changes. We know that many bereaved people continue to have a bond with the person who died – in a different way.

## **4. What Schools Can Do To Help**

Children and young people will understand death through the language we use to describe it. Using euphemisms and other words for death (loss, asleep) can be confusing. It is helpful for children if we use the word 'death' and 'died', and do not avoid these. Honesty and clear language around death will help prevent

misunderstanding. We will try and answer children's questions honestly, but it is also okay to say 'I don't know, but I will try and find out'.

***Staff do not have to be 'bereavement experts' to help grieving pupils. Kindness, compassion and a listening ear go a long way to supporting bereaved children.***

Whilst acknowledging that not every bereaved child needs counselling and it takes time for children to adjust, children and families might benefit from specialist bereavement services.

As a Norfolk School we can make referrals to Nelson's Journey for all children who live in Norfolk. They are a Norfolk based charity that supports children and young people aged 0-17 years inclusive that have experienced the death of a significant person in their life. They aim to improve the emotional wellbeing of the children in a variety of ways including therapeutic residential weekends, activity days, NJ Clubs, 1<sup>st</sup> Smiles Scouts and therapeutic 1:1 work; as well as guidance and education to parents, carers and professionals. They offer a support line and an early support service for families who have recently been bereaved (correct: March 21). At Smithdon High School we also refer young people to Winston's Wish and Nelson's Journey.

When children display ongoing problems for a significant amount of time, where problems are not getting better or deteriorating, or when there are serious issues like self-harm, not eating, not attending school, then a referral to specialist services may be needed. Referrals can be made to the JON or Just One Number (Healthy Child Programme 0300 300 0123) or Point 1 which offers Tier 2 mental health services to children and young people in Norfolk (correct: March 21). Families may also wish to consult their GP. Please see our mental health policy for more information.

Sometimes the death of a family member might be covered widely in the media. It is helpful to know what information is in the public domain. When children are bereaved by suicide, families are often left with agonising questions. Schools can sometimes be a hotbed for rumours and speculation. It is important to acknowledge this, and respond appropriately, considering the wishes of the child and family. When deaths are investigated by the coroner, maybe because it was an unnatural death or the cause of death was unknown, this information is usually covered in the media.

The organisation Seesaw gives some helpful tips of helping children through grief:

- Be there
- Initiate and anticipate
- Listen
- Silence is golden
- Accept and acknowledge the expression of feelings
- Offer opportunities for remembering
- Learn about the grief process
- Help the child find support and encouragement
- Allow the child to grieve at their own pace
- Be patient...
- Provide for times of fun
- Give a child choice
- Believe in the child's ability to recover and grow
- Be yourself

*SeeSaw has also written an action flowchart which may be helpful to consider, please see appendix 1.*

We place great importance on working in partnership with parents/carers. Some families may wish to have close involvement with the school, whilst others prefer things to be more private. It is important that we ensure that the children's needs are met, whilst taking account of the families' wishes. Children and young people may have a wide-ranging religious and cultural beliefs and traditions, and it is important to respect differences. Whilst respecting family's wishes, it must be remembered that we have a duty of care towards all children. We are committed to meet the social, emotional and behavioural needs of our children; we will also follow our safeguarding procedures. Please see our safeguarding policy for more information.

Good Practice is as follows and we will follow this as much as we can or as appropriate.

### **Immediately After Being Informed**

- We will contact the parent/carer to express sympathy – this might be difficult, but it is much easier if you get in touch with the family early on.
- We will gather as much information as possible about the circumstance of the death, and find out what the child has been told.
- We will encourage children and young people to come back to school as soon as is possible.
- We will explain that support will be available for them and that you will discuss this in detail upon their return.
- We will share information with all staff – and talk with them again after you have met with the child and family and know their wishes, e.g. what kind of support would they like from staff.
- We will meet with the parent/carer and child to find out their views of how they would like to be supported. We will do this at different stages depending on the situation. We all acknowledge that this might be difficult, but unless you discuss this with the child/young person you will not know what support will be helpful to them.
- We will discuss with the young person:
  - If and how children would like the information to be shared with their classmates
  - Who would be the best person to provide support for them, and who they can talk to when they are finding it difficult
  - Discuss how children can access time out if they are finding it difficult to cope with a lesson (time out cards can be helpful)
  - Identify a person who will keep in touch with home
  - Pressures of homework and exams

### **Short-Term Support**

We will be sensitive to the needs of the bereaved child – these might be different for different children. Some children might appreciate the availability of a quiet space – but others might just want the usual opportunities to be with their friends and experience a sense of normality.

We will also need to be aware of other children who might be affected because they have also experienced a recent bereavement. Children sometimes provide a

considerable amount of support to their friend – we may need to consider how they are supported, and whether to make parents aware.

Reassure children that their feelings are normal in their situation.

We will monitor how children are progressing academically, as we know that many bereaved children do not achieve as well as their peers. Many children struggle with difficulties with concentration as the bereavement takes up a lot of thinking time. Young people tell us that teachers sometimes get angry with them as they had not completed work – being unaware of their situation. Good communication across the school is really important – particularly in high schools.

Staff cannot be supportive if we are too precious about the information we share – all staff need to know.

We will give praise for any achievements and reassure the child that things will improve in time. If necessary, we will support the child to catch up with work missed. We acknowledge that it is a challenging task for our staff to find a balance between allowing for difficulties whilst not lowering expectations. We will notify examination boards of the impact of bereavement if exams are due. We need to be aware that sometimes children can feel great pressure to achieve following a bereavement.

Be consistent with expectations for appropriate behaviour, but do offer support if a child has difficulties.

Arrange regular 'check in' meetings with their trusted adult to monitor their progress and take account of issues as they arise, offering early support.

## **Funerals**

Families are all different, some may hold a large funeral where members of the school community are invited, others might hold a small private funeral. In any case, as a school we need to find out the family's wishes in regard to the attendance of a representative from our school, where appropriate. It is important to discuss whether this should be the headteacher, or whether it is important that staff who knew the child and family well, attend.

## **Long-Term Support**

We are aware that grief does not operate on a timetable, and it may be months or years later that a young person is most in need of support. As children and young people are growing up, their understanding and needs change, and many will revisit their bereavement at different stages of their life, especially as teenagers.

Our teachers are aware that when we are tackling sensitive subjects as part of the curriculum, we will not avoid them, but will be sensitive to the needs of bereaved children.

It might be helpful for us to make a diary of significant events (such as birthdays, anniversary of death) that can be passed on from year to year and to other schools during transition. It may be possible to add these events onto our database which will be accessible to all staff working with the young person.

People sometimes think it best to avoid painful reminders such as mother's or father's day, but giving children the choice of what they want to do is really important. Avoiding the topic can leave children feeling that others do not care, or

have forgotten their loved one. Providing opportunities when children can remember their loved one can be really important. Above all be sensitive to this.

### **Supporting Parents/Carers**

A death in the family can cause a disruption for many months. Family members are grieving, relationships alter and members may take on new roles.

If appropriate, we will acknowledge the death by sending a card or phoning parents. Parents often report that other people avoid them because they do not know what to say. Coming back on the playground, taking their children back to school for a first time after a bereavement can be very difficult and as a school we can make arrangements to make it easier for them, e.g. meet them, allow them to drop their child a bit earlier/later, etc. We will do our best to support parents in these circumstances. We may ask our parent support advisor to be in touch with the family, they may be a helpful link with parents.

Keeping in touch with families and letting them know how their children are doing can be helpful. We can do this via home-school books, telephone calls, planners, etc. We will find out from parents/carers what would be most helpful to them. If helpful, we will provide a named link person for families.

## **5. How Staff Will Be Supported**

Bereavement is 'not only painful to experience, but also painful to witness' (Bowlby, 1980).

Supporting bereaved children can be very stressful. Support needs to be offered for a long time, and there are no easy solutions. Witnessing another person's grief can also remind staff of their own experiences of bereavement.

As a school we have a duty of care towards our employees, and we will ensure that staff are appropriately supported when dealing with difficult issues, like supporting bereaved children. Headteachers are responsible for putting appropriate support mechanisms in place for staff. They should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Staff can also support each other. It is important to know one's limitations. There is only so much staff can offer, and sometimes it is time to refer children on to specialist bereavement services.

Being prepared can give staff confidence, which will make it easier to support bereaved children – there is training available for any member of staff, offered by the Norfolk Critical Incident Service and specifically tailored to schools, and we will enable staff to attend training. Smithdon High School is committed to this training and the staff were last trained in this in December 2023.

## **6. Teaching About Death And Bereavement**

Death happens to children of all ages – it does not wait for them to be old enough to understand. Death seems to be a subject that nobody wants to address. Yet, in a survey by Ofsted of 178 young people about their views on preferred topics in PSHE, 'learning to deal with bereavement' was selected as their first choice (Ofsted: Not yet good enough, 2012). Through providing a curriculum that acknowledges and addresses death and bereavement we can improve the skills of children and young people to deal with and emerge positively from it.

As a school, we are committed to an education about death and the associated rituals and traditions of mourning. We will provide opportunities for discussion that help lessen the stigma attached to death, reducing its status as a taboo subject.

We will teach about death and bereavement in PSHE, RE, Philosophy and Science, we will use opportunities for teaching about death and bereavement in other subjects as well. Occasionally staff may feel that they can share their own experience of death and bereavement, which children and young people may find valuable if this provides a basis for class discussion. Sometimes we can use occasions when children start talking about death and bereavement as a whole class discussion and further teaching opportunity.

Materials for teaching about death and bereavement are available and can be requested from the Critical Incident Service. It is a collection of materials provided by different organisations. A booklist is also available.

## **7. Roles and Responsibilities**

### Headteacher

As Headteacher, I will ensure that this policy is implemented, and that a co-ordinated response is provided to bereaved children and their families. I will ensure that all staff know what is expected, and that everyone can contribute in a way that is consistent with the ethos of the school. I will ensure that information is shared with all staff, and passed on to other schools at times of transition. I will put appropriate support in place for staff, and allow staff to attend appropriate training opportunities. As a Headteacher, I will promote teaching about death and bereavement across the curriculum.

### Governing Body

The governing body will approve the policy and ensure that it is implemented consistently across the schools. We will review the policy on a regular basis, involving the headteacher and staff who are delivering support for bereaved children and who are responsible for the curriculum. We are committed to a whole school approach to bereavement and will regularly evaluate how we approach this. We will use the 'Growing in Grief Awareness Audit Tool'

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/campaigns/growing-in-grief-awareness.aspx>.

## **8. Further Information**

This policy has been adapted by our school from the sample bereavement policy, written by the Norfolk Critical Incident Lead Officer (November 15, revised March 21), taking account of their own experience, as well as good practice guidelines, please see references below, and in consultation with bereaved children and parents.

## **9. References**

Bereavement and Loss: Guidance for schools, Leicestershire County Council

Supporting bereaved pupils in school – SeeSaw's Information Pack for school

Bereavement policy framework– Surrey Healthy Schools



Childhood Bereavement Network

Not yet good enough: Personal, social, health and economic education in schools – Ofsted 2012

## **10. Useful Websites**

[Child Bereavement UK](#)

[www.nelsonsjourney.org](http://www.nelsonsjourney.org)

<http://www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk/campaigns/growing-in-grief-awareness.aspx>

## **11. Advice/Support and Training**

Norfolk Local Authority Schools have free access to the Critical Incident Service, with academies and independent schools being able to subscribe. We critical incident support as well as support and advice in relation to bereaved children. Regular training about how to best support bereaved children in school communities is also provided, this can be accessed by anyone working in the school community. Please see contact details below.

## **12. Contact Information**

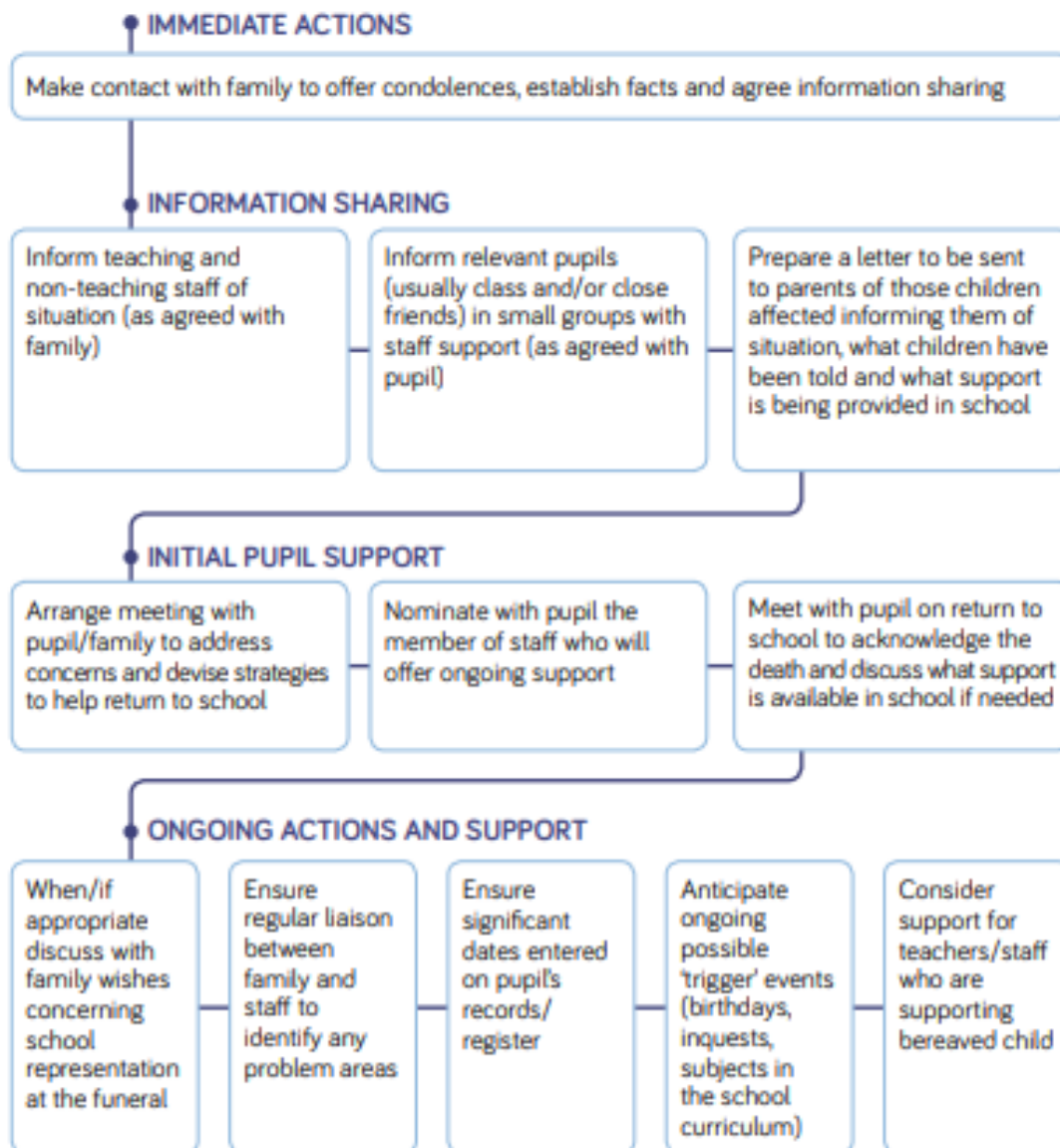
Dr Bianca Finger-Berry, Critical Incident Lead Officer (March 2021)

[bianca.finger-berry@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:bianca.finger-berry@norfolk.gov.uk)

Tel.: 01263 739064 or 07887 832413

## Appendix 1

### Flow chart of actions following a family bereavement



***Be aware that grief is a lifelong process and can re surface at any time***

Source: <https://www.seesaw.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SCHOOLS-PACK-PDF-1.pdf>

Christine Druce, Schools and Families Liaison Worker,

**SeeSaw,**  
Bush House,  
2 Merewood Ave,  
Oxford OX3 8EF  
Tel 01865 744768  
Reg. Charity No 1076321 Reg Company No 3790965