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Guidance to support parents when dealing with a bereavement

Introduction

Bereavement and loss are an inevitable part of living and growing. Every one of us will experience bereavement in our lives, and as schools we work alongside our families to support them and their children during this difficult time. Bereavement impacts everyone in different ways and for different periods of time. We know this is a difficult subject for many families to broach, and often, as individual, we are very under prepared for what to say, how to feel and what to do.

This guidance has been written to give links to advice and support using advice from Child Bereavement UK, Winston's Wish and Simon Says bereavement organisations. We hold a separate policy in the Trust for procedures and support that will be used in the case of a pupil or staff member dying.

Evidence from these charities demonstrates it is important that adults and children are kept informed; rumour and gossip can be very damaging and can even lead to both young and old developing the attitude that the death is not a topic to talk about. Children and young people have a healthy curiosity, and if they are not informed of the circumstances or feel they are unable to ask questions, their normal grief process can be obstructed.

Obviously the circumstances of the death can affect what steps are taken; a sudden death of an adult or child can be very difficult for the adults to process. Children grieve as much as adults, but they show it in different ways. They learn how to grieve by copying the responses of the adults around them, and rely on adults to provide them with the support they need in their grief.

Children's understanding of death at different ages

The age of your children affects how they respond and their understanding. Child Bereavement UK have information on this:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=4ad94b98-cdf7-45f7-a606-3e5b78d5b002>

Telling your children

People often think that children do not grieve, but even very young children will want to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened and perhaps most importantly of all, what happens next? There is a video available on <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/telling-a-child-that-someone-has-died> to support you.

- Most children and young people affected by a death just need adults who care about them. You cannot take away their sadness, but you can acknowledge it and support them through the experience. Reactions will vary. If they were not close to the person who died, they may be unaffected.
- Any death may make children and young people anxious, as they become more aware of their own mortality and that of those around them.
- Questions are healthy, as is curiosity. A good approach with any age is to acknowledge what has happened and then answer questions as they arise. Having accurate information will enable you to answer questions with facts rather than rumour; try to obtain this from a reliable source so that information is both accurate and sensitive to the wishes of the bereaved family.
- Young children often do not have adult inhibitions surrounding death and you may be taken aback by some of their comments and reactions. It is not unusual for them to act out funerals or play at being dead. It is their way of trying to make sense of what has happened. Teenagers may become withdrawn and difficult to engage with. Respect their need for personal space whilst gently reminding them that you are there if they need you.
- Young children (under the age of 6) do not usually understand that death is permanent and may expect the person to come back. It is still important to tell them the person has died – use an explanation such as *‘When someone dies, their body stops working, and this means that they don’t need anything to eat or to drink and they can’t feel anything. Because their body has stopped working, they can’t come back to life, even though we may really want them to.’* You could use visual examples from the natural world to help explain, such as comparing a dead leaf on the ground and a living leaf on the tree.
- Answer questions honestly using age-appropriate language. It is better to use the words ‘dead’ or ‘died’ rather than euphemisms which can be confusing. A simple biological explanation of death can be very helpful. “When someone dies their heart stops beating, they do not breathe and their brain doesn’t work anymore.”
- If you do not know the answer to their questions, say so. Children often have a surprising capacity to deal with the truth, if given information in simple, straightforward language, appropriate for their age and understanding. Young children tend to make up what they do not know, and their imaginings are often worse than the reality. Adolescents and teenagers could resent a lack of honesty from the adults around them.
- Do not think that you have to hide your own sadness. Seeing adults expressing emotion can give a child of any age ‘permission’ to do the same, if they feel they want to. Hearing how you are feeling may help them to consider their own feelings.
- Maintain routines, such as going to school. Familiar situations and contact with friends brings security and a sense of normality. Continue to expect the usual rules of behaviour. Normality with love and compassion is what to aim for.

You may notice some of the following which are all normal as long as they do not continue for too long:

- Change in behaviour, perhaps becoming unnaturally quiet and withdrawn or unusually aggressive.
- Anger is a common response at all ages and may be directed at people or events which have no connection to the death.
- Disturbed sleep and bad dreams.
- Anxiety demonstrated by clingy behaviour and a reluctance to be separated from parents or carers. Older children may express this in more practical ways, for example by expressing concerns over issues that adults may perceive as insensitive or unimportant.
- Being easily upset by events that would normally be trivial to them.
- Difficulty concentrating, being forgetful and generally 'not with it.' This makes school work particularly difficult and academic performance may suffer. Older children may feel that there is no point in working hard at school and they might lose a general sense of purpose in their lives.
- Physical complaints, such as headaches, stomach aches and a general tendency to be run down and prone to minor illness.

How might they act?

Children and young people have a limited ability to put feelings and thoughts into words and tend to show feelings with behaviours rather than words. Reactions will vary greatly as children absorb and process information in different ways at different ages.

The following reactions are common, and are likely to settle over time with reassurance, acknowledging what has happened and their feelings, giving them clear and age-appropriate information, and keeping to normal routines.

Picking up on tension and distress

Children pick up on tension, distress or anxiety in adults, and may mirror this in their own behaviour. Even babies sense that something important is missing, and may cry more than usual. Children of all ages may be clingy or unsettled.

Appearing not to react

Children under 6 years old do not understand that death is permanent. Children cannot handle strong emotions for long periods, and may jump quickly in and out of grief ('puddle jumping'). When told that someone important has died, some children may look blank and ask 'can I play' or 'what's for tea?' They may have heard, but they are not able to process what that means yet. They may react later with sudden crying, outbursts, changes in behaviour or asking questions.

Asking questions and exploring what death means

Children may ask repeatedly: "When's Nanny coming back?" or "Where has she gone?" even though they've been told clearly what has happened. They may hunt everywhere for a 'lost' person, and so a clear explanation of what 'died' means may help. Children may play games where the person dies, or is still alive. They may seem fascinated with death, play-act about death or ask repeatedly about it. All of these are ways that children show that they are processing their understanding of what has happened.

Feeling anxious or insecure

When someone dies, a child's sense of safety is rocked. They may not want to leave you, and may cling to you or follow you everywhere. They may behave as if they are younger: being very quiet or tearful, having temper flare-ups, sucking their thumb, being reluctant to do things they used to do with confidence, or wetting the bed.

Try to keep to normal routines which will help them feel safe, and keep them informed about plans for the days ahead. Tell them who will take them to school or activities. If you need to leave them, tell them when you will be home, or who will be looking after them.

Include them in simple decision-making that affects them. If the person who died was ill, address any fears about the illness (for example that it is not catching), and reassure them that you are not ill and not leaving them.

Anger

Anger and other strong emotions are natural reactions to sad or shocking news, and some children and young people may not be able to understand or manage their own feelings. They may feel angry at the person who died, at family, at themselves or at the world in general.

It can help to tell them it is understandable for them to be angry, as long as they don't hurt themselves or anyone else. Safe ways to release anger include hitting cushions, vigorous physical exercise, messy painting sessions, or going outside to shout very loudly.

Another idea is a 'safe zone' where they can go to calm down. This could be a quiet corner with familiar items that help them to feel safe.

Looking after adults or feeling responsible

As children realise that death is permanent, they also become aware that it happens to other people including themselves. They may be protective and try to look after their important adults and siblings. They may feel that they were somehow responsible for the death.

Primary aged children may show 'magical thinking' where they think 'if I do this, Dad will come back'. They may behave very well to compensate for what's happened, or behave less well-behaved because they feel angry or guilty.

Denying what has happened or taking risks

Bereavement can be overwhelming, and can bring huge changes, alongside other challenges that young people face as they grow up. They may want to forget or deny the death or how strongly they feel. They may feel 'what's the point?' with school or social activities. Some young people may be impulsive or take risks, in an attempt to get back some control in a life that for them currently feels very out of control.

What helps grieving children and young people

Every child is unique and will cope with the death of someone important in their own way. There is no magic formula but things that help include:

- Clear, honest and age-appropriate information.
- Reassurance that they are not to blame and that different feelings are OK.
- Normal routines and a clear demonstration that important adults are there for them.
- Time to talk about what has happened, ask questions and build memories.
- Being listened to and given time to grieve in their own way.

Child Bereavement UK has some booklets children can fill in to express their feelings, build memories and feel less alone <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-children-and-young-people>

What if your child wants to see the person who has died?

See the advice on <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/telling-a-child-that-someone-has-died>

How do you explain funerals and involve your children?

See the advice on <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/telling-a-child-that-someone-has-died> and <https://www.winstonswish.org/attending-the-funeral/>

Telling the school

We encourage you to come in and make an appointment to meet with a member of staff who you feel comfortable telling about the family bereavement so that we can offer support to you as a family and directly to your children.

We know that some families may want to share information directly with a member of staff, some will want to involve the school community, and others will not. A simple confirmation of death can be all that is needed – it is up to you and your family how much you wish to share.

How will we help you

The circumstances of the death will change how we offer support - for example the death of a pet for a child is an entirely different circumstance to having a parent or sibling die.

Staff at Timu will:

- Listen without judgement
- Offer support
- Communicate with you regularly about your children and how they are behaving in school

Where applicable:

- Continue to work with your family over time to ensure we offer support and clarify your wishes
- Discuss what you would like us to share with the staff and children (as necessary) and when this should be shared
- Do our part to prevent speculation and rumour
- Discuss with you if you would like a book of condolence or somewhere that staff and pupils can pay their respects. If this is agreed, we will offer opportunities for you to come and visit, or take photos to share with you later. Before the tribute is removed, we will inform you and prepare the staff and pupils for this beforehand
- Ask you if you would like to have a remembrance assembly within the school community so that we can bring the staff and children together to reflect on and remember the person who has died. It gives the other children the clear message that it is ok to be sad, and equally ok not to be affected, as well as giving us an opportunity to tell them about other support that is available
- Ask whether you would like us to have any involvement/representation at the funeral such as flowers, a collection etc. Discuss whether pupils can be involved in choosing the flowers sent or organising the collection. Talk to you about whether staff can attend the funeral and if so how many.

- Speak to staff about what has happened, the message that should be shared with the children and exactly what will be said (to support the staff)
- Identify any staff and children who are absent and will need to be informed (where necessary)

What the school will do in the short term

Although school can provide stability and normality for pupils, some flexibility may be necessary for some or all pupils. This will be discussed with you depending on the circumstance and how your family is affected.

We will take the following actions:

- Consider any cultural or religious implications following the death
- Ensure a senior member of staff is nominated for supporting staff and children who remains available as needed within school
- Identify an allocated quiet place where children, young people and staff can go if necessary – this can be any quiet room at either school.
- Try to engender an awareness of when people need help and support, particularly those who worked closely with the person who has died and administrative staff who are taking telephone calls etc.
- Support staff and children who have been affected
- Be prepared to offer additional bereavement support as necessary
- Consider whether pupils want to do an activity to express their thoughts and feelings
- Support staff in being aware that some pupil responses, or lack of response may be upsetting for adults and children alike. No apparent response does not mean a child does not care, particularly in children with ASD.

In the longer term

Staff will:

- Ensure the children have a safe space to go to when they feel overwhelmed with feelings and give them empathy that it takes time to grieve and this is a different experience for everyone.
- End any discussion on a positive note - not all people who are ill or have accidents die - many get better. Consider a prayer to remember the deceased and their family. Perhaps co-ordinate an assembly to end discussion.
- Be prepared for questions to come up in the future and to offer support as and when it is needed
- Have access to resources and stories to support children in learning how to grieve

What helps grieving children and young people

Here are some links to give advice:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f468eec4-3b7c-4a1e-9690-6eed73d5db02>

Supporting children under the age of 5:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0590bf84-7261-41a5-8b16-3ca3f87557cc>

When a grandparent dies:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=6d1294d7-758f-401e-80fd-89c85c2205d2>

Supporting children with additional needs (SEN)

All children benefit from being given simple, honest “bite size” pieces of information about difficult issues - often repeated many times over. For further support visit www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx

When talking about death and bereavement with a child with learning difficulties it might be helpful to consider: -

- **WHO** should be key member of staff working with you and your child –this will be someone with whom they ALREADY have a good relationship with.
- **WHERE** is the child most receptive to new ideas? – quiet room, pool, outside. Use this space for talking with them.
- **WHAT** should be talked about? We will ensure that you use the same language and ideas as you to avoid confusion.
- **HOW** is new information normally given? - signs, verbally, pictures. Use their normal communication methods to talk about illness and death.
- **HOW** is new information normally backed up? – you will probably need to repeat information a number of times over a long period. Do you need us to make a social story (picture based)?
- **PROCEED** at a level, speed and language appropriate to your child.
- **BUILD** on information given – small bites of the whole, given gradually will be easier to absorb.
- **REPEAT** information as often as needed.
- **WATCH** for reactions to show your child understands – modify and repeat as needed.
- **FOLLOW** your child’s lead – if indicating a need to talk or have feelings acknowledged, encourage as appropriate.
- **WATCH** for changes in behaviour to indicate the child is struggling more than they can say and offer support as needed.
- **MAINTAIN** normal daily routine as much as possible.

See the Child Bereavement UK guide section on Pupils with SEND for additional advice

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=74e7be4a-022a-4400-a398-bd6922440292> or <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=e99e1f53-01c0-4112-bfa4-e2a58dfb4e24> for children with ASD.

Supporting a bereaved child to return to school

Many children will be keen to go back to school to get back into their routine, be around their friends and get on with their work. This can give them a safe space away from the grief of their family. Not all children want to come back to school, but the longer they stay off school, the harder it is to return.

Before your child returns

- The staff member supporting you will be in touch to keep regular contact – that way we can understand how we can support and to discuss concerns and worries
- The staff member will meet with you to discuss the child's return – organising a safe space your child can go to if they feel overwhelmed by grief and need some time-out. How does your child want to share their news about why they have been off – or do they just wish to come back in as usual?

Some of the more common concerns raised may be:

How will staff and peers react– who has been told, what do they know, what will be said, how much will I have to say to people?

Staff will help by - meeting with your child to welcome them back, acknowledge the death and talk through their concerns. Saying something simple like “I am sorry to hear that your dad died – sometimes it helps to talk about it and if so, who would you like to be there for you?” is usually much appreciated by them. If possible offer them choices about how things should be handled and what support would be helpful. Let staff and classmates know how they want to be received and supported.

Fear of sudden emotional outbursts – anger, distress, panic...

Staff will help by - normalising grief reactions and giving them choices about what strategies will help them to cope in the classroom e.g. able to leave lessons without fuss – “exit card” system, where they can go, who they can talk to.

Fear when they realise they may not remember what the deceased person looks like

A laminated photo of the deceased person may give enormous comfort when the visual image begins to disappear. A special teddy or other memento will often give great comfort in times of distress and upset. Your child may also want to show this at school when talking about the person who died. It will be stressed that whatever helps the child within reason should be encouraged.

Fear of being behind with work and unable to catch up

Staff will help by - clarifying what is essential to accomplish and what can be left, and offering appropriate help to achieve what needs to be done.

Inability to concentrate and feel motivated or sit still

Staff will help by – reassuring your child that this lack of motivation and concentration is normal and will pass. We will offer shorter more manageable tasks, write down the task, give encouragement for achievements, and minimising difficulties can often help.

Family grief impacting on normal family functioning

Staff will help by - talking to you and your child to ascertain where areas of difficulty lie and try and work out strategies with you to help keep things on an even keel in school.

Unable to meet homework/project deadlines because of altered responsibilities within the family and home

Staff will help by – talking to you and support your child to meet priorities. We will be flexible where possible and offer additional support where needed.

When your child returns

- Staff are aware that when children return, they can behaviour in an ‘out of character way’ through dealing with their emotions – this could be through lack of concentration, feeling tired, tearful, angry or frustrated. This could also be through physical symptoms such as headache, tummy ache and feeling sick. These will all have an impact on your child’s learning.
- Staff will keep ongoing contact going. This could be face to face, phone calls, a contact book or we can set up an email address for you to use
- Staff will be aware that when children return to school they may suffer from separation anxiety and will work to reassure them
- Staff will maintain normal rules and expectations of behaviour. This is important for the children at school and the child who has been bereaved. The rules and expectations are all part of the ‘normal’ routine and will help to make them feel secure. Staff will consider the impact of bereavement on the whole family when giving sanctions and the impact the sanctions may have on the whole family.
- The class teacher will be aware of the effect of grief on the child’s progress; some children work really hard and so may put themselves under extra pressure to succeed, while others may find it difficult to focus in class and on their work. This will be shared with you where it becomes a concern.
- Staff will not judge the child since grief is a very personal experience. Staff will be supported to openly acknowledge what has happened (from giving the child a card to express care and concern to having a discussion with the child).
- Bereaved children need time and for staff to be prepared to listen – it can take many months before children are able to fully cope with school life again.
- Staff will make a note of significant dates which might affect the pupil, e.g. date of death, birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries. Make sure other members of staff are aware of these and the possible impact these may have. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge these potentially difficult times with them e.g. “I know Christmas is coming up and it might feel a very different and difficult time for you all this year without your Dad – so don’t forget, if it helps to talk you can always come and see me”.
- Staff will consider possible reactions to class/assembly topics. They will discuss (with you and/or your child) how these difficulties might best be managed with them e.g. if making Mother’s day cards do ask them if they wish to be included in the activity too, very often the answer is ‘yes’ as they still have a parent, they just can no longer see them, but still want to remember them.
- Staff will be mindful of the signs of isolation, bullying or difficulties in the playground – bereaved children may be seen as vulnerable and may become a target.
- Staff will consider using books/activities to help explore feelings and ideas about death as part of the normal school curriculum.

- Staff will be alert to changes in behaviour – these may be an indication that the child is more affected by their bereavement than they are able or willing to say. Reactions may present themselves months or years after the event, and it may be difficult for staff and others to relate behaviour(s) to the bereavement.
- Staff will ensure that at transition to a new year group or school, that the new class teacher is aware of any concerns around the bereavement and its ongoing effect.

Remember, there is no set pattern or time limit to grief – it is a unique experience and the process is a lifelong one. At different ages and during new or transitional times children will have new questions requiring answers and questions requiring a re-visit of what happened; to develop a better understanding and acceptance.

Support within your family

Grieving for a child of any age

The agony of losing a child of any age is unparalleled. There is no age or point in time that makes it any easier. No parent expects to face the death of their child and no grandparent expects to lose their grandchild.

The death of a child goes against the natural order we expect life to follow. The loss carries with it the loss of the future, the hopes, dreams, and potential that can never be fulfilled. The longing for the child and the feeling of emptiness can last a lifetime.

Some parents describe feeling complete disbelief, mixed with flashes of reality too awful to think about. You may feel numb, empty, enraged, anxious or exhausted. You may feel guilty, feeling that you were responsible for their safety and that you should have been able to prevent what happened. Some parents also feel guilty because they have survived their child.

There may be nothing you could have done differently, but such feelings can be strong and can be replayed over and over again as you try to make sense of what has happened. There are films and supporting articles on <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/grieving-for-a-child-of-any-age>

Supporting other bereaved adults

As adults, we may be trying to deal with a death in our own family, or to a close friend or wider acquaintance. We receive little-to-no training in how to support others in such a difficult time, but Child Bereavement UK advice is:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/supporting-bereaved-adults>

What is helpful

Acknowledge their bereavement early on: Say something like “Hello, it’s good to see you. I am so sorry” or even “I don’t know what to say.” Simple honesty is better than avoiding the subject. Crossing the street to avoid a bereaved person or looking past them can be very hurtful.

Be led by them: How they respond to you saying “I’m sorry” will help you to understand whether they want to talk about their loss. A quick thank you and a change of subject mean they probably don’t want to talk at this point, a more open response may show that they do. If in doubt, ask them.

Mention their child if they want this: Be guided by them, but if they want to talk about their child, don’t be afraid to bring their child’s name into a conversation and share any memories you have.

Offer support that you can deliver: Practical support like preparing a meal can be very helpful, but do ask the person what they need. You could also offer powerful emotional support by just listening, giving them a hug or sending a card. Be honest with yourself about what support you can practically and emotionally manage. Perhaps you can offer lifts to school, while another friend has time for a regular cup of coffee. Bereaved people will recognise the value in each type of support.

Offer to find information for them: The practical considerations surrounding a death can be extremely difficult for grieving families to take in. Offers of help through this process can be invaluable. If you are their employer, give clear, simple information about any leave they can take and any flexibility around their return to work.

Be patient: Grief can make anyone very sensitive, anxious or short-tempered. It may feel like you can't say or do anything that will help. Just being there for them without being intrusive may help them more than you know.

Keep in touch: There's often a lot of support around when someone is first bereaved, but this reduces as time passes. Stay in regular touch and ask the bereaved person again a few months later if you can help, as people's needs change.

Remember anniversaries and special days: The anniversary of the death, birthdays and other special days may be very difficult. Sending a card, or just saying that you remember, may be very much appreciated.

Seek support for yourself: Spending time with someone who is grieving often puts us in touch with our own losses. It's important that you feel supported so that you can help your friend, relative or colleague. This is also important if you are a professional supporting someone who is bereaved.

What is usually not helpful

Don't avoid them. A simple 'It's good to see you' with a smile can help someone feel less isolated.

Don't say 'I know how you feel' or make assumptions. Everyone's experience is unique, even if you have been through similar experiences. Instead, acknowledge their feelings: 'how horrible for you' or just listen. Listening without judgement is a very powerful gift.

Don't give your opinions on what the person should do, unless they ask for this. If they do ask for advice, try not to be offended if they then don't take it. Everyone's way of managing grief will be different.

Don't act on the person's behalf without consulting them. It may seem helpful to clear out a nursery after their baby has died or arrange the funeral for them, but it is crucial that these kinds of decisions are made by the parents when they feel ready. They have already lost so much – it is vital not to take away their control over important decisions in your own need to be helpful. If they ask you to help, that is different, and being alongside them while they make difficult decisions can be very helpful indeed.

Special circumstances

Early on for a child, how a person died is usually less important than it is for adults. No means or cause of death is better or worse than another for a grieving child. They are all overwhelming.

If a death is expected (for example, through cancer or other illness), the family may have had time to prepare for the loss. They may have begun to adjust to the future without the person, to make sure that photographs have been taken, letters to open in the future have been written, goodbyes said. It is very likely that the family will have received help – and will continue to receive help – from a hospice-based service or other support service (such as Macmillan nurses).

However, the family may also have suffered through a prolonged period of stress in which the children felt unable to undertake normal activities or to rebel or have fun; a period when the family focused on the person who was dying in a way that the children found very hard.

If a death is sudden (for example, through a heart attack or road accident) there is no chance for goodbyes and no chance for preparations or adjustment. The last conversations linger in the memory. There is no professional whose role it is to support these bereaved families (although police family liaison officers and hospital-based bereavement services make valuable contributions). However, for some people, a sudden death may be seen more positively (for example, of a frail grandmother).

If a death is through suicide, there are particular difficulties for the families left behind. It has been estimated that for every suicide, six people will experience intense grief – and many more will be deeply affected. Those bereaved through suicide face especially intense feelings and thoughts, ask themselves more agonising questions and face more public scrutiny. For both children and adults, it can take a long time to dare to trust others again.

Explaining miscarriage, still birth or death of a newborn baby to a young child

See advice from Child Bereavement UK on

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=6c507550-de4b-497c-aa35-7b8b25ac404d>

They also have films to support you when you suffer the death of a baby for whatever reason on

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/when-your-baby-dies>

When a family member is not expected to live

Child Bereavement UK has a film and supporting advice on

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/when-someone-is-not-expected-to-live> and Winston's wish has a booklet on <https://www.winstonswish.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/MAC15372childforlossE1lowrespdf20151223.pdf>

When a parent, main carer, sibling or other special person is not expected to live, the prospect of communicating this to a child is very daunting, especially when you are upset or in shock. For a parent who is seriously ill, the thought that their children will grow up without them may be devastating. To protect children, and themselves, parents or carers may want to avoid the subject for as long as possible. This is even more understandable when it is not certain what course the illness will take, and how the child's life will be affected.

However, even very young children tend to pick up when something is wrong, though they may not fully understand what is happening. They will feel more secure if they are kept informed in a way they can understand. Avoiding the subject may leave them afraid that they have done something wrong, or too worried to ask questions.

Honest communication is important; often to protect the children, families may avoid the subject but this can result in children feeling excluded from something important but they are not sure what.

We appreciate that some families will not feel able to tell the school about such a daunting situation, but where you can, we can help.

- At times school staff can be faced with difficult questions. Staff will try to establish their understanding of what is happening by turning the question around e.g. ‘tell me what you think?’ It is not usually appropriate for the staff to add information, but it is ok to acknowledge what the child already knows. When these questions are raised, this will be shared with you.
- Staff will be aware of the ‘roller coaster’ of emotions that the child will be going through. This can display itself as poor behaviour or as a change in behaviour.
- It can be equally challenging for staff to know how to tread the line between acknowledging the distress and maintaining normality. Staff will focus on the fact that the person is still alive and talk about them in school as normal, unless you have notified us that the death is very close.
- The pupil affected will be provided with additional opportunities to voice fears and anxieties – this may be through an external agency, or with a suitably qualified member of staff. It is common for children to feel in some way responsible so they will need lots of reassurance that there was nothing they said or did that caused the illness. Child Bereavement UK guide has workbooks in their Books and Resources section to help pupils express their concerns.

Sudden deaths including accidents, suicide and homicide

Bereavement can be devastating in any situation, but a sudden death brings additional layers of shock, horror or disbelief. The reality of what has happened may be very difficult to accept and you may be desperately searching for meaning and understanding. When the death is unexpected, you may have regrets over lost opportunities and unfulfilled plans. With no chance to say goodbye, there can be a sense of unfinished business, and a need to go over and over the events of what happened.

Child Bereavement UK have advice on <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/sudden-death-including-accidents-suicide-and-homicide> as do Winston’s Wish on <https://www.winstonswish.org/out-of-the-blue-talking-about-sudden-death/> including how to continue supporting your child after such a frightening event.

A death by suicide is likely to be even more difficult for families to face and to understand. There can be specific challenges for the whole family, and for children and young people when grieving after a suicide <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=35e5ddb5-cd67-4e06-9885-d91da07650cf>

The website also has films to help you tell your child and give them support afterwards.

Corona Virus

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges to our lives, so dealing with a bereavement can be challenging.

Child Bereavement UK has some special resources to support your child during this time, and what to do when you can’t visit someone who is ill <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/Pages/Category/coronavirus>

External support agencies

The following agencies can offer support:

www.simonsays.org.uk - Child/Adolescent Bereavement Support.

www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/bereavement.aspx – Advice when supporting someone with autism cope with a death.

www.childbereavement.org.uk – Supports families and professionals when a child is bereaved or facing bereavement.

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk - Childhood bereavement.

www.childline.org.uk - Free national telephone helpline for children and young people.

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk - All aspects of bereavement.

www.griefencounter.org.uk - Helps bereaved children & young people rebuild their lives.

www.hopeagain.org.uk - Specifically for young people aged 12-18. supportline.org.uk - Confidential emotional support for children, young people & adults.

www.papyrus-uk.org - Provides resources & support for those dealing with suicide, depression or distress – particularly teenagers & young adults.

www.seesaw.org.uk - Grief support service for children and young people.

www.sands.org.uk - Providing support for parents & families whose baby is stillborn or dies soon after birth.

www.theredlipstickfoundation.org – Support for families bereaved by suicide.

www.uk-sobs.org.uk - Those who are left behind after a suicide can be helped by talking to others who have experienced a similar loss.

www.Widowedandyoung.org.uk – peer-peer network for those widowed before their 51st birthday

www.winstonswish.org.uk - Help for grieving children and their families.